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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FIRST DECEMBER NUMBER

FEATURING

Wrong Side of the River
By RAY GAULDEN

BRANDED IN BLACK
By TALMAGE POWELL

RANCH FLICKER TALK
by the famous movie star
ROBERT CUMMINGS

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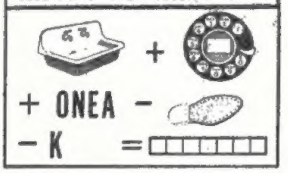
HOW TO SOLVE SAMPLE PUZZLE

CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE.



You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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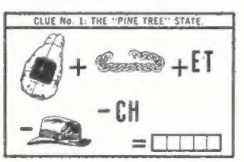
CLUE No. 1: THE "PINE TREE" STATE.



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30th Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST DECEMBER NUMBER

Dec. 4, 1953
Volume 182, No. 2

RANCH ROMANCES

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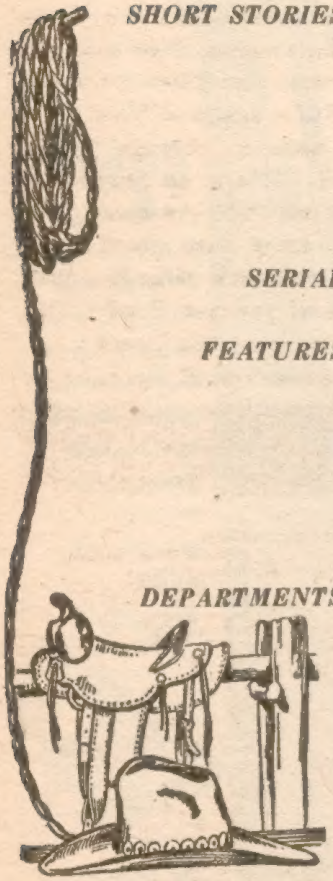

HELEN DAVIDGE
Editor

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A Lot of Man

Dear Editor:

I have just come home from Korea, and am stationed at Greenville Air Force Base. I have plenty of time to write and would like to exchange letters and snapshots with some nice girls. I am 24 years old, weigh 200 lbs. and stand over 6' tall. I collect stamps and money from all over the world. I also take pictures and am considered a good photographer.

A/1C EDWIN C. WHITTEMORE
AF 12249587
3505th Installations Sqdn.
Greenville Air Force Base
Greenville, Miss.

Patriotic Gal

Dear Editor:

I am very lonesome in a town where I know but few people, and letters from boys and girls would mean so much to me. I especially would like to hear from servicemen and hospitalized veterans. Life in our army or veterans' hospitals can be very lonely; I have been in these hospitals, and I know. I'm 22, weigh 122 and stand 5'5" tall. So write a lonesome girl who is away from home and yearns for lots of mail.

ETHEL M. ALARIE
110 Isabella St.
Sioux City 3, Iowa

Lots of Time

Dear Editor:

Having been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for a good many years I would like to have my letter put in Our Air Mail. I am a widower 50 years old. I work from 4 P.M. to 12 P.M. and have lots of time to answer all letters. Would like to hear from someone my own age and up to 60.

WILLIAM MULLER
238 East 19th St.
New York, N. Y.

American Indian

Dear Editor:

I am an Indian of 46. I'm 5'2" tall and have coal-black hair and love to dance. I collect dolls from all over the world and make clothes for them. I will exchange pictures with anyone. Come fill my mailbox.

FLORENCE YOUNG
8136 Devenir
S. Downey, Calif.

Not So Dull

Dear Editor:

I read every issue of RANCH ROMANCES, and enjoy them very much. I am 17 and would like to make some new friends. I have dark brown hair and brown eyes. I like reading books and writing letters. Please fill my mail box.

BETTY DULL
R.R. 2
Winchester, Ind.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 29 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

City Slicker and Country Hick

Dear Editor:

We are cousins. Carol, the Country Hick, lives on a farm in Missouri. She is 17 years old and likes all kinds of sports, popular music and photography. Darlene will be 14 in October; she lives in St. Louis, Missouri, and is a City Slicker. Both have same interests. We like to make new friends, and promise to answer all letters from foreign countries as well as the United States. Boys and girls, drop us a line.

DARLENE LANDRY
CAROL HAYES
5657 Hebert St.
St. Louis, Mo.
College Mound, Mo.

Tall Girl

Dear Editor:

Congratulations on a splendid magazine; I enjoy reading it very much. This is my first try to find a little corner in Our Air Mail. I like people and would like some of them to write to me. I'm 5'8" tall, 124 lbs. and am 15 years old. I like popular music and letter-writing.

SUE RIBER
Box 323
Owen, Wisc.

Lonesome Traveler

Dear Editor:

I am 18 years old, have dark brown hair and green eyes. I am 5' tall and tip the scales at 114. My hobbies are sports, both indoor and outdoor. I have a large record collection, and enjoy movies. I also travel a lot but always alone. This is very lonesome. I would like to meet new people and make friends, so please fill my mailbox.

MICKEY FLEMING
1021 N. Cedar
Spokane, Wash.

Two Lonely Gals

Dear Editor:

We are two girls who like to write and receive letters. We would appreciate getting any mail you kind people would write. Vivian is 15 and 5'4½" tall, light brown hair and green eyes. Darlene has brown hair, blue eyes and is 4'11". She is 17 years old.

We are very lonely and would like to make friends.

VIVIAN ANN GRISBY
DARLENE RUSK

355 North Kansas,
Wichita, Kansas
1721 East 3rd,
Wichita, Kansas

R.C.A.F. Buddies

Dear Editor:

We are both buddies in the Royal Canadian Air Force stationed in Northern Canada. My name is "Dick" Tremblay and am 23 years old, have curly brown hair and weigh 170 lbs. My friend is "Bob" and has blue eyes and brown hair and weighs 150 lbs. We would like to hear from gals from 19 to 25.

LAC TREMBLAY JDR
#36617
McNAMARA RJ
#204650

R.C.A.F. Stn.
Bagotville, Que., Canada

Wants More Letters

Dear Editor:

I'm 14 years old and have black hair and brown eyes and stand 5'4" tall. I like horseback riding and playing the piano. I like to write letters and at the present time write to 70 people but hope to hear from hundreds more. I'm the only girl in my house and I get lonesome. Won't you please write to me?

I promise to answer all letters I get from anybody, any time.

BETTY JEAN PACE

Box 821
Roymondville, Texas

Faithful Reader

Dear Editor:

I read my first copy of RANCH ROMANCES in 1937. I haven't missed a copy since then. I have some 300 people I correspond with but would like to make new friends. Out of the 300 I still write to, we have become very friendly and often visit each other. I collect stamps and my favorite sport is basketball.

I have plenty of spare time so come on and write me.

WALLACE WARD

Box 92
Whiteville, N.C.

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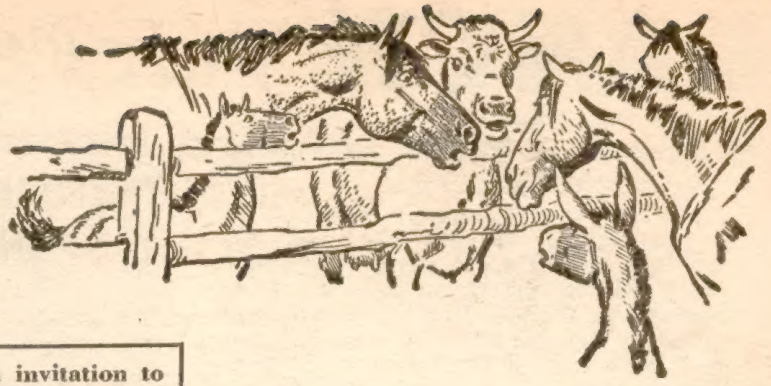


PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

IN BOISE, Idaho, a lady blessed by luck hauled a 28-inch rainbow trout out of an irrigation ditch on her front lawn—with a garden rake.

AN OLD WEST NAME was dropped from the active files at Saddle Mountain, Okla., upon the recent death of 107-year-old Hunting Horse, Kiowa chief who scouted for General Custer.

IN HOUSTON, TEXAS, Constable George Larkin irately "wanted" a forger passing checks signed George Larkin. . . . In the same town an unfinished jail building released its first prisoner —a snoozing plasterer who was locked in by mistake.

A FISH STORY from Los Angeles states that a bass was caught with a full lower denture plate. We conclude that either some fisherman ain't eating steaks or there's a top-notch dentist in Davy Jones's Locker.

IN GALLIPOLIS, O., where romance laughs at the years, a 93-year-old boy recently wed a 77-year-old gal.

IN CROW'S LANDING, Calif., on Crow Road, Mr. Crow recently got permission to stuff a bird he'd captured. The bird was no relative—it was a quail.

IN COUNCIL BLUFFS, Ia., a watchdog with a sense of duty sat patiently guarding a forgotten baby buggy until its owner was notified of her oversight the next day.

IN DALLAS, Tex., a he-man lover is thinking things out in jail, where he landed after tearing up his girl friend's wardrobe to prevent her dating other men.

IN OLYMPIA, Wash., the Tax Commission is awed by the conscience of some resident who sent in $700 in cash —no name, no note. But they're holding it—just in case of a change of heart.

IN OKLAHOMA CITY, Okla., television became too realistic for a lady whose picture-box produced a 42-inch live reptile.

FROM WALLA WALLA, Wash., comes the report of a wise alley cat who strolled into the emergency ward of a hospital to give birth to a kitten. . . . In Portland, a 71-year-old grocer, unrobbed for 27 years, still isn't. Taking his chances, he chased off with a handy piece of pipe a gun-toting, masked young man.

A DRIVER out in Salem Ore., was fined when the only license he could produce was one he won in a crap game.

IN SAN ANTONIO, Tex., a mean goose who lost its head and attacked a little boy, lost its head again—on court order—and wound up on the dinner table.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

Ramrodding Western film talk for RANCH ROMANCES' readers is Hollywood star Robert Cummings. Top-hand in many a Western himself, Bob is well fitted to slap his critical brand on films with most appeal for lovers of Western lore.

Bob, born in Missouri, charmed Broadway audiences long before he got his first lead in the Westerns which brought him fame. Now star of NBC-TV's MY HERO, Bob says films, radio, TV and the stage keep him hopping—but he still finds time to relax on the home range with his wife and three children.

HONDO

Warner Bros. assign John Wayne the dangerous task of keeping order in some mighty wild, WarnerColored country

WESTERN movie fans are likely to feel a little possessive about John Wayne, in spite of the fact that he's the biggest box-office attraction in Hollywood. We're inclined to feel, when he makes an Irish comedy or an American sports picture, that he really ought to get back out West where he belongs.

Right now, as far as I'm concerned, he *is* back where he belongs, as the star of *Hondo*—fighting Indians, rescuing ladies in distress, and in general keeping order in a mighty wild country.

Hondo is the story of a U. S. Cavalry dispatch rider, trapped in the Southwest in Indian country with the beautiful widow of a man he had killed. Being John's first Western in a couple of years, *Hondo* was given a lavish production suitable to the occasion. Just to give you an idea—the publicity release says "*Hondo* is the first film to use Warner Bros. all-media camera . . . the best features of three-dimension, two - dimension and wide-screen WarnerScope . . . also in WarnerColor with WarnerPhonic sound."

Well, now you know as much as I do, except that, having seen the picture, I can tell you all that means stupendous, terrific, colossal.

Hondo was filmed entirely in Mexico. Even interior scenes were shot there, instead of at the home studio. Headquarters for the troupe was the town of Camargo, (500 miles south of the Border, and 1,000 north of Mexico City) which would have been in summer doldrums without the movie company, nearly 100 strong.

It wasn't hard to understand why the tourists desert Camargo in July. The temperature hovered around 126. The roads were like hot talcum powder underfoot, and the most numerous local inhabitants seemed to be rattlesnakes and Gila monsters.

The human citizens turned out in droves,

however, when the call went out for laborers and extras. The latter appear as Apaches, with ten Hollywood stunt men disguised among them, to keep the galloping horses where the cameramen wanted them.

The laborers built a ranch house, plus sheds and corrals, where most of the action was filmed. Even the insides of the building were filmed, thanks to what the set designer called his "wild walls," i. e., movable.

John has long dreamed of making a movie in Mexico, which he calls his second home. One of his good friends is President Miguel Aleman, who gave his blessing to the project by lending some of his own fine horses for use in the picture.

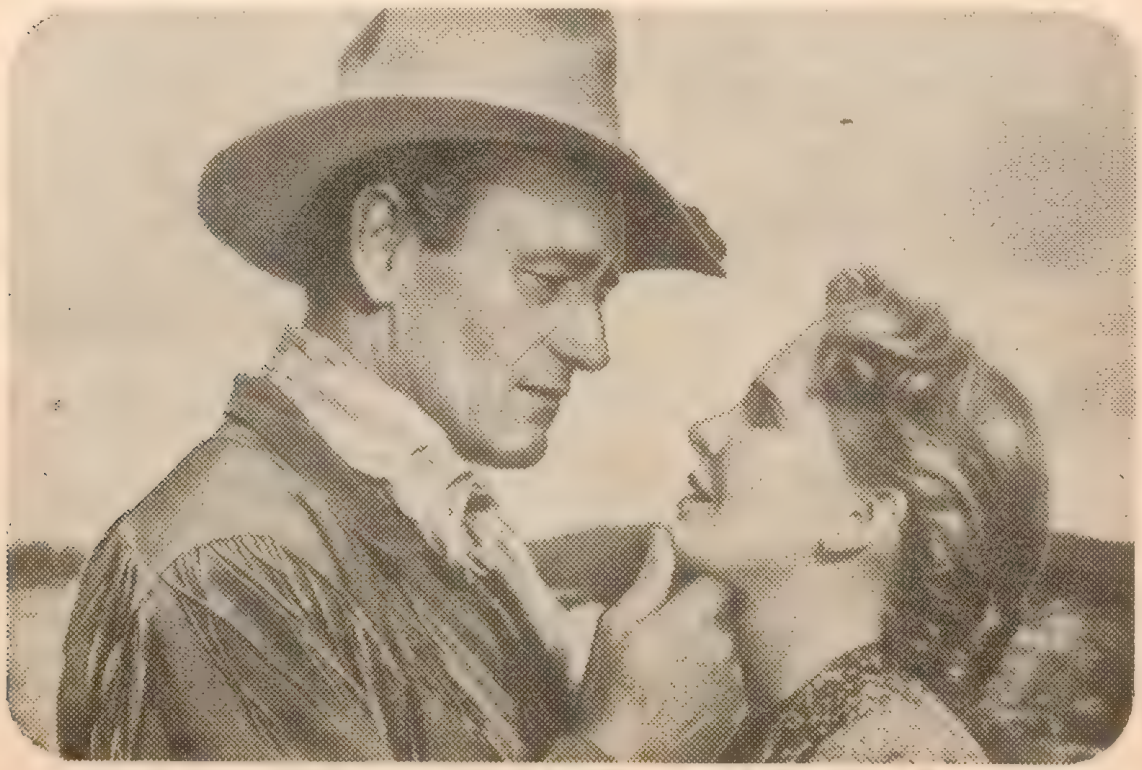
The only girl in *Hondo* is Geraldine Page, who burst like a skyrocket into stardom last year on Broadway.

She's not one to rest on past achievements, however. Movie-making was a new challenge to her (even though she was in one previous film in which her name appeared in 21st place on the credits) and she was determined to make her first major screen role a truly memorable one.

Lee Aaker, just about the busiest 9-year-old in Hollywood, plays Geraldine's son. Lee takes his movie scenes seriously, and he's been in some mighty exciting spots during his career—he rescued his father from drowning, crashed in an airplane, and was stalked by a wildcat, for instance.

Another star of *Hondo* is the hero of my favorite success story for the week. He's known simply as Pal, and he plays John's loyal mongrel sidekick. Pal is actually no cur—he's a pedigreed collie. Every day the make-up man had to do the unusual job of uglifying, not beautifying, an actor.

His success story is a familiar one in Hollywood. For years Pal has been working hard, winning neither fame nor glory, as a stand-in for Lassie. And now he has his big chance. Undoubtedly he's dreaming of being a big star himself some day, though not with his shining coat dulled with brown grease paint and an ugly scar across his nose.



A memorable scene with John Wayne and Geraldine Page

BILL WILLIAMS

Opera—Grand and Horse

RANCH FLICKER TALK

MAKING Western movies," says Bill Williams, "has made a Westerner of me."

He wears blue jeans and cowboy boots around his ranch house; he finds a twang creeping into his speech; he's learning to play the guitar, and he's mighty handy with a rope.

But none of this came naturally to Bill at first. He was born in Brooklyn, the son of a delicatessen owner, and his name was William Katt. He enjoyed athletics—swimming, hockey and baseball—and he never wanted to be a cowboy. In fact, his real ambition was to be an opera star!

After a couple of years with the St. Louis Municipal Opera Company, and another couple of years touring the world as (1) a singer and (2) an airline pilot, Bill ended up in Hollywood.

He made plenty of movies, but his career didn't really get into high gear until he was offered the starring part in TV's Kit Carson series. That was two years ago, and now Bill's show has the top rating for Westerns—beating out even well established Western stars.

In fact, Bill is now better known to the public than when he made movies exclusively.

"I'd made about seventy movies, but I never got hounded for autographs and mobbed on the street the way I am now."

So, having become a Westerner in fiction, he decided to become one in fact. He'd always admired horses from a distance—("just about the distance between the screen and my seat in a theater"). By this time he's a pretty good rider, but he's not satisfied to be fair-to-middlin' in the saddle. He still takes a two-hour lesson every day when he's not working.

He also wears a $700 holster and gun set around the house, just to practice his draw, and he enlists the services of his three-year-old son to perfect his roping.

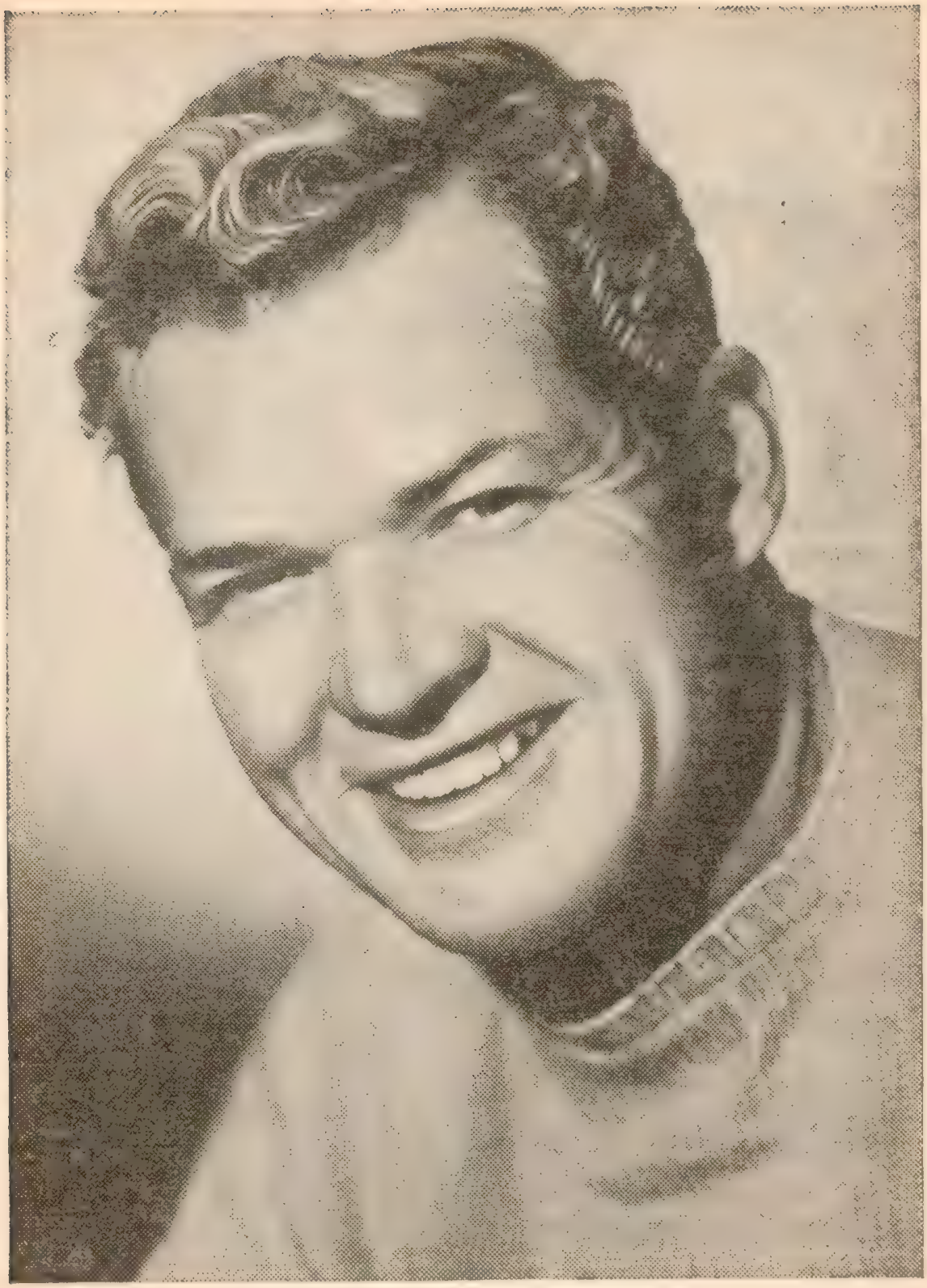
Bill, Jr., thinks it's great fun to play calf for Pop. He runs around the back yard till Bill, Sr., gets him in his loop and knocks him flat. Then he disentangles himself, gets up and starts running again. I can see how this might be fun for Daddy, but sonny's part of the game doesn't appeal to me.

However, both Bill Jr., and his older sister Jody think that working or playing with their father is the greatest fun in the world. If he washes his car (a British racer), they wash their cars (a fire-engine and a sports model—both pedal-powered).

Bill *calls* himself just a putterer, but he's actually the handiest man to have around the house in all of Hollywood. With his own hands he built a brick wall 165 feet long and five feet high. And with the help of four high-school kids (plus Jody and Bill, Jr., of course) he built a swimming pool and installed a diving board.

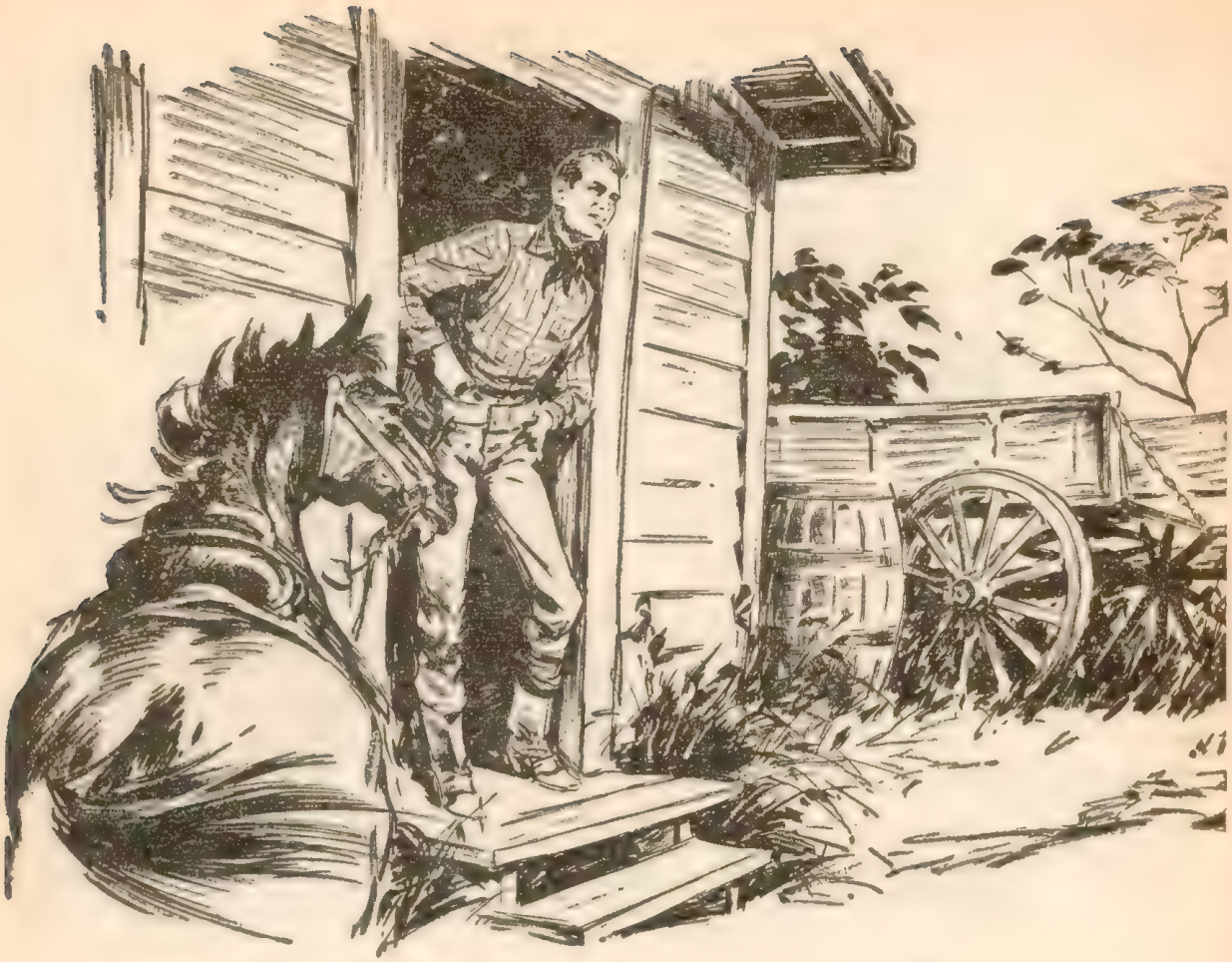
When you see Barbara and Bill enjoying their home and their family so much, you have no doubt that theirs is one of the really solid Hollywood marriages. Even when, a little while ago, Barbara's career was in high gear and Bill's was in low, jealousy never came between them. And at the moment, with Bill planning a future as a Western hero, complete with rodeo appearances and a "Kit Carson" line of clothes and toys, Barbara is more interested in Bill's fame and fortune than in her own.

"And," she confided to me, "there's a third baby on the way—and that makes home look like a wonderful career to me."



(Paramount)

Bill traveled the long road from Brooklyn to the Wide Open Spaces



Wrong Side

ACROSS THE SHANAMOA everything was more tempting—from riches to women. Now Clay had to make his choice

by RAY GAULDEN

of the River

CLAY CHALARON and the Chain Links crew rode eastward, heading toward the Shanamoa River. Chalaron was in the lead, his gray eyes narrowed against the sun glare, a sourness working in him. He didn't like this mission, but it had to be done. When you worked for a man like Hugh Wimbard, you looked after his interests or you didn't last long.

Behind Chalaron one of the crew said, "Reckon I could have scared them off when I first spotted them, but—"

"Sure," the man riding beside him cut in. "Only you figured it might be a good idea to have a little help."

"Well, you can't tell what you're gonna run into, and I never was one to take fool chances."

The rest of the crew had something to say, five men making idle talk that held no interest for Chalaron. He rode in silence, his flat-cheeked face somber as he stared out across rolling miles of grassland.

"What the hell are we poking along for, Clay?" Page Mathis called, his voice sharp with impatience. "I've got a gal waiting for me in town."

"You're always in a rush, Page," Chalaron said without looking around.

Mathis, a lean, hard-muscled man, held a tight rein on his buckskin, saying, "When there's a chore to do, I don't believe in stalling."

Chalaron hipped around then, his face tight as an old resentment crowded him. Before he could answer, Lon Healey broke the tension. "Yonder's their camp."

Another rider grinned crookedly. "This hadn't oughta take long."

Chalaron looked down a grassy slope to where a wagon was parked in a bend of the river. He could see two people at the camp, a man and a woman, and he swore under his breath. Why couldn't those ten cow outfits ever learn?

"You reckon they'll give us any trou-

ble?" Lon Healey asked, his hand on the butt of his gun.

"There's only two of them," Chalaron said dryly. "And one of them is a woman. Get your hand off that six-shooter, Lon, and take it easy."

"There could be somebody in that wagon," Healey pointed out. "Just waiting to open up with a scattergun."

"Not likely," Chalaron told him. "Besides, there's six of us to be handled."

TOM LANE

MARSHA LANE

CLAY CHALARON

"Yeah, but two loads of buckshot could cut down the odds in a hurry."

Irritated, Chalaron said, "If you're getting cold feet, Lon, the rest of us can handle it."

Healey flushed, then seeing that the others were watching, he put his shoulders back, and said, "Let's go."

Chalaron rode toward the camp and the crew came behind him, five men who were silent now, ready for trouble. Chalaron glanced at them and cursed softly at the glint of eagerness in Mathis's green eyes. How could a man find pleasure in something like this—in a possible shooting?

They passed a small herd of cattle and Chalaron looked at them, thinking, "A man with a handful of cows in need of graze. Some shirt-tail operator." Again the sourness stirred in Chalaron.

Willows were green along the banks, the dank smell of the river strong in the air. But Chalaron kept his eyes on the camp. He saw a woman in a faded sunbonnet kneeling beside a small fire, her head

turned against smoke that twisted up around a lined face. His gaze passed over her to settle on the man. He was busy at the wagon, lifting something, and evidently not aware that riders were approaching.

The woman saw them first and her lips parted, but no words came. She stayed there by the fire, smoke swirling up around her, and watched them with growing uneasiness. Chalaron looked at the man, saw him turn to face them. He was tall and thin and he wasn't wearing a gun.

FOR A LONG MOMENT after the six riders came to a halt there was no sound except the roar of the river. The woman still hadn't moved, and the man, too, was motionless, staring at them. His arms were full of bedding, some blankets and a patch-work quilt that made a bright splash of color in the sunlight.

"You folks figuring on settling here?" Chalaron asked, his voice breaking through the quiet.

"Kind of thought we might," the man answered cautiously. "Anything wrong with it?"

"You know damned well there is," Page Mathis said roughly.

Chalaron gave him a sharp glance. "I'm doing the talking, Page." He looked back at the man beside the wagon. "You're on Chain Links graze, mister."

The woman spoke then, her voice edged with bitterness. "I tried to tell you, Sam, but you wouldn't listen."

Sam said without looking at her, "Be still, Nora." He put the bedding back in the wagon, a slow-moving man with tired eyes, and again faced the six riders. "I'm not a sodbuster," he said with pride. "Got a small herd, and some day—"

"Sure," Chalaron said. "But you're still on another man's graze."

Sam sent a sober gaze across the range. "Lot of grass for one outfit to claim."

Page Mathis moved his horse in beside Chalaron, impatience in his hard eyes. "Let's get on with it, Clay. That wagon ought to make a real pretty blaze."

The woman took a step away from the fire, moving toward her husband. He had stiffened now, and his hands were clenched.

Saddle leather squeaked as Mathis started to swing down. Then Chalaron said quietly, "Hold on, Page."

Half out of his saddle, Mathis stopped, and he was scowling. "All this palaver ain't getting us nowhere."

"I'm handling it my way, Page."

"It's not the way Hugh would do it."

"I said I'm handling it." Chalaron's voice was flat.

Mathis colored and defiance was in his eyes as they clashed with Chalaron's. For a long interval the two men stared at each other, neither speaking, neither moving, and Chalaron wondered if the break had finally come. He watched Mathis, knowing that the wire couldn't be stretched much tighter.

At last Mathis, with a slight lift of his shoulders, said, "All right, Clay, you're running the show." He paused, and in a lower tone he added, "For now."

One of the riders let out his breath as the tension broke, and Chalaron returned his attention to the man called Sam. He was still standing at the tailgate of the wagon, his hands knotted, but uncertainty in his eyes.

"You folks can stay here tonight," Chalaron said. "No longer."

Temper broke loose in Sam then and he whirled around to reach inside the wagon bed. Sunlight glinted on a rifle barrel, but before he could bring the weapon up his wife ran forward and grabbed hold of him. "No, Sam!" she cried. "You wouldn't stand a chance."

Chalaron watched them, hoping he would listen to her, knowing what would happen if Sam tried to use the rifle. "She's right," he said soberly. "Don't be a damned fool."

After a brief struggle, Sam turned loose of the gun. He looked down into his wife's white face and said heavily, "All right, Nora."

Chalaron kept his face stern, showing them no compromise. "Be gone by morning."

Sam's shoulders were slumped. He didn't

answer, but the woman, nodding wearily, said, "We'll leave."

CHALARON wheeled his horse and rode down-river, the crew following him.

Lon Healey gave a short laugh. "I reckon we put the fear in them, all right."

"Yeah," another puncher said. "Now we can get on to town and make up for lost time."

Page Mathis rode a short distance behind the others, keeping to himself, saying nothing. Chalaron noticed there was a dark brooding expression on the man's face.

"Ain't this the day Hugh's supposed to come home?" Healey asked.

Chalaron nodded.

"Must be pretty nice," Healey said with a grin, "to have the dinero to do just about what you want. Two whole months he's been gone, having himself a time down there in Denver. You suppose he found that wife he went after?"

Chalaron shrugged. He had planned to ride with the crew, but now he changed his mind. "I'll see you boys later," he said.

Mathis sent him an oblique glance and rode on with the others. Chalaron laid a thoughtful gaze on his back. When they were out of sight, he turned to look toward the camp, thinking of the man and his wife, wondering if he could forget the beaten expression on the woman's face.

Swearing softly, he rode on, trying to put the man and woman from his mind, telling himself there would always be that kind of people. Feeling sorry for them didn't help. The only thing to do was see that you didn't get in the same fix. Play your cards right and never try to buck a man like Hugh Wimbard.

He started toward town, riding slowly, troubled by a discontent that had been piling up in him for weeks. The wild music of the Shanamoa was in his ears and he looked at the opposite bank, remembering the years of hardship he was trying to forget. The river cut through the corner of a wide valley—just a stream of water between him and the past.

Climbing to a cedar-dotted rise, Chalaron had a good view of the land beyond the river, and he sat slack in the saddle, letting his gaze wander. He could see the twisting stream that was Lost Creek, the buildings that marked some of the small outfits. There were the Lanes, the Hunts, and the others, good people who never stopped to think about the odds they were bucking. They worked hard, sweated and skimped to pay off a note at the bank, and what did it get them? A couple of good years, maybe, and then one tough winter and they were right back where they started.

He had seen it happen to his folks and to others, and because he didn't want it to happen to him, he had crossed the river and signed on with Hugh Wimbard. In one year he had worked his way up to foreman. You couldn't lose with a man like Wimbard. You did what you were told and put your money in the bank. That's what he'd been doing for three years. At first the bank account had given him a good feeling, but lately, somehow, it didn't seem to mean much.

The urge to cross the river rose in him now and he tried to fight it down, but it remained, strong and impelling. At last he gave in, telling himself it wouldn't hurt to take a look at the old house where he was born.

Crossing the Shanamoa at a ford, he turned up Lost Creek and followed the stream for several miles. Alders grew along the banks and berries were ripe—chokecherries and wild plums. He passed a spot where he and Tom Lane used to come fishing, and he smiled, remembering the time they had ducked Tom's sister, Marsha, in the creek.

HE RODE ON a short distance and then the house was before him, made of logs that his father had dragged down from the hills. Two rooms and a lean-to that he had told himself he never wanted to see again. Now he reined in and sat looking at it, remembering that severe winter that had wiped them out, killing two fine people.

Slowly he got down and walked to the doorway. There was no lock on the door and as he opened it he recalled something his father had once said: "We've got some bad men in this country, son, gents who'll steal your cows and sometimes put a bullet in you, but they ain't prowlers."

Chalaron stepped inside and stopped, surprised that the place was clean and in order. The pine table still stood in the center of the room and he moved over to it, frowning at the lack of dust. There was no indication that anyone was living here, yet the floor had been recently swept.

While he was puzzling over it, hoofbeats sounded outside. Still frowning, he went back to the doorway and saw a rider come across the yard. It was a girl wearing overalls, a blue work shirt, and an old black stetson. Her name was Marsha Lane and there had been a time when he saw a lot of her, but that was a long while ago, back when there was fun and laughter and no worry about the future.

Now he saw her maybe once a month, when they both happened to be in town. They'd pass a few words and that was all because she belonged on the wrong side of the river, a girl who was part of the life he had put behind him.

She rode a dappled gray that Chalaron knew she had raised from a colt. There was an odd feeling inside him as he watched her come to a stop.

"I didn't expect to find you here, Clay," she said, looking at him in surprise.

"On my way to town," he told her. "Just thought I'd stop by for a minute."

She sat straight in her saddle, slim and attractive even in those men's clothes. Her

Her lips returned his kiss with a hunger that matched his own

eyes were brown and her hair, long and shining, looked darker than he remembered it. Seeing her only now and then he had failed to notice how she had filled out.

She looked beyond him, her eyes moving over the log walls of the house. "It's still a good house," she said quietly. "Strong and well built."

Chalaron gave her a searching stare. "Why do you bother to take care of it?"

"It gives me something to do."

"You've got plenty to do helping Tom with the outfit."

She kept looking at the house, while her eyes turned wistful. "I used to spend as much time here as I did at home. Your mother said I could ask more fool questions than anybody she ever saw I was always pestering her, but she didn't seem to mind."

Ill at ease, Chalaron reached for his tobacco sack, taking more time than was necessary to put a cigarette together.

"I had some good times here, Clay," Marsha said with a warm smile. "I can't stand to see the packrats take over."

That was like a woman, he thought, full of sentiment, talking about a weather-beaten shack like it was something to cherish, as if it were a monument of some kind. A man saw things differently. He remembered the heartache, the wasted effort and the disappointment.

AVOIDING her eyes, he turned toward his horse. "I'd better get on. Say hello to Tom for me."

She sat watching him, holding the reins loosely in her brown hands. They were strong hands, he thought, capable of doing a man's work. She'd make some fellow a good wife and one of these days she'd marry a man from her side of the river. They'd scratch for a living on some two-bit outfit, but Marsha wouldn't complain.

When he was in the saddle, she said quietly, "Have you ever thought about coming back, Clay?"

"There's nothing here that I want."

She kept looking at him. "It's good range, and it could be restocked."

"Sure, but it'd still be a two-by-four outfit, no matter what you did."

Her gaze turned critical. "Now you're talking like Hugh Wimbard."

Anger touched him. He fought it down and let her see a dim smile. "I know when I'm well off, Marsha."

"Do you, Clay?" she said, watching him closely. "Or is it that you think this place isn't good enough for Jewell Evans?"

The anger came back, stronger this time; it put heat in his face and a roughness in his voice. "Let's leave Jewell out of it."

Temper was bright in Marsha's eyes and then it faded as quickly as it had come. "I'm sorry, Clay. I shouldn't have said that. It's just—"

He looked at her, more puzzled than angry Then he grinned and said, "Forget it"

Her smile was rueful. "I don't know what's wrong with me lately, but Tom tells me I'm getting too ornery to be around. It seems like I'm always jumping him about something."

"You used to be real easy to get along with," Chalaron murmured.

In a serious tone, she said, "I guess we all change when we grow up."

He sobered, turning those words over in his mind while silence ran between them Then, with a glance at the house, he smiled crookedly. "Better forget it and let those packrats take over."

She looked away from him, not answering.

Chalaron studied her for a moment, trying to read her expression. Failing, he lifted his reins and said, "See you later."

She nodded and watched him ride out of the yard. . . .

Leaving the house, Chalaron skirted a grove of quaking aspen, then turned to look back. Marsha had dismounted now and was standing in the doorway, sunlight bright upon her. She had removed her hat and he noticed that her hair fell loose about her shoulders.

Chalaron frowned, unable to understand why she wanted to waste her time fooling around the place. Three years ago he had left it, promising himself he would never come back. Now he wondered why he had today.

THE TOWN of Shanamoa was built on the river's west side, Hugh Wimbard's side. Jillard's livery stable was the first building, and beyond that was

Swenson's general store, the bank, and Bender's Bar. It was a small town, the county seat twenty-five miles to the south.

Chalaron rode down the single street. It was narrow and crooked, the buildings made of log and adobe. Since this was Saturday there were more people in town than usual. A rack in front of Bender's Bar was lined with Chain Links horses, and he knew they would most likely be there until closing time.

The bank, a small adobe building, was across from the saloon, and it was here that Chalaron reined in. As he was about to step inside, a sudden racket across the street pulled him around. The saloon's batwings parted and a man came rushing out, his short legs pumping frantically as he tried to keep his balance.

It was George Evans, the town constable, and the man looked scared. He slammed into a porch post, bounced off, and staggered down the steps backwards. He made it across the walk and came up against the hitch-rack, hitting it hard with his back.

A man walking down the street shook his head and grinned. "Looks like somebody's got old George on the run."

Chalaron looked past Evans, putting an amused gaze on the batwings. They were still swinging, and from inside the saloon a man's laugh boomed out, loud and mocking. Then the laughter died and glass made a crashing sound.

George Evans remained against the rack for a moment, holding onto it to keep from going down. Then he straightened, saw Chalaron and came hurrying across the dust strip.

"Damn it, Clay," he said with a worried glance over his shoulder. "That crew of yours is getting out of hand."

"They're always a little hard to handle on payday," Chalaron said, trying to hide his amusement. "You ought to stay out of their way."

"I wasn't bothering them," Evans growled, wiping moisture from his fleshy face. He was a small man, watery-eyed and chinless. "I was drinking a beer and minding my own business when that cussed Mathis started picking on me. He told me to beat it, and because I didn't move fast enough, he threw me out."

Chalaron looked at him, knowing that George was never cut out to be a lawman, and wondering if there was anything he could do well. The man's constant complaining irritated him, but since he was Jewell's father a lot had to be overlooked.

"You ought to pack a six-shooter," Chalaron said, frowning at him. "Then gents like Page wouldn't be so quick to jump you."

Evans uttered a harsh laugh. "What do I know about guns? I'd just get myself killed. I shouldn't have taken the job in the first place, but I let you and Jewell talk me into it. Damn it, I'm a business man and I deserve something better than this."

"Nothing better has shown up," Chalaron said, trying to fight down his irritation. "And you've got a family to take care of."

"Sure," Evans said bitterly. "I need the money, but not bad enough to be a target for every tough that comes along. I'll find something else to do, and in the meantime Jewell can go on working at the restaurant."

"You know how she hates that place."

"Maybe she does, but I sure don't intend to be pushed around by fellows like that Page Mathis."

"There won't be any more trouble," Chalaron said, trying to calm him. "I'll talk to Page."

Evans snorted. "A lot of good that'll do. He's already off on a good start at taking the town apart. By dark everybody'll be scared to stick their heads out their doors." The constable's head jerked around as the sharp report of a gun came from the saloon. He said shakily, "Mathis is probably wrecking the place, but I'm not going back in there."

Chalaron laid a thoughtful gaze on the saloon, gave his hat a tug and started across the street. For a moment, Evans stood alone on the boardwalk, staring after him. Then, aware that townsfolk were watching him, the constable flushed and turned quickly into an alley next to the bank.

ANOTHER shot sounded as Chalaron was approaching Bender's place. From inside came the swift pound of boots and a dozen men broke through the batwings. With a wild glance over his shoulder, one of them said, "That damned fool is going to kill somebody."

The batwings were still swinging when Chalaron stepped through them and entered the saloon. Inside, he paused to make a quick survey, noting that the few remaining patrons were backed into a corner, motionless, as they stared at the bar. Chain Links had the mahogany all to themselves and they were grinning as they watched Page Mathis, who was sitting on top of the bar with a smoking gun in his hand.

"Watch this one, boys," Mathis said, squinting at a chandelier. "See that doodad on the bottom?"

"Better have another drink before you try it, Page," Lon Healey said. "Might—" He broke off, said something in a lower tone as he spied Chalaron.

Mathis lowered his gun and the room got quiet except for the firm, deliberate sound of Chalaron's boot heels. With the six-shooter still in his hand, Mathias sat there on the bar, his legs dangling.

"Thought maybe you were still out there on the river," Mathis said, grinning thinly. "Helping those folks pack and feeling sorry for them."

Chalaron came to a stop in front of him, and Lon Healey, backing away, bumped into another puncher. The man cursed softly and gave Lon a shove that sent him halfway across the room. He came up against a card table, started back, but changed his mind and stayed where he was.

"You can have your fun, Page," Chalaron said mildly, "without scaring the daylights out of folks."

"I'll have my fun any damned way I please."

"Not here in town," Chalaron told him. "Get out or quiet down."

Mathis stared at him hard. "You been eating loco weed?"

Chalaron shook his head slowly.

"Then how do you get off telling me what to do?"

Chalaron's patience was gone. "So you figure to stick around and keep up the hell-raising?"

"Unless there's somebody big enough to stop me."

Chalaron knew that talk wouldn't do any good, and he knew something else, too. The break had finally come. This was it. He stepped forward, and grabbing Mathis by the shirtfront, jerked him off the bar. Before Mathis's boots were on the floor, Chalaron hit him with a solid right that drove Mathis half the length of the bar. As he was going down, he caught the edge of the mahogany and pulled himself up.

Chalaron moved toward him, knowing that Mathis wasn't drunk, that he only had enough whisky in him to make him mean. He hung there on the edge of the bar for a moment, then stepped away, at the same time scooping up a brass cuspidor from the floor. Chalaron saw it coming and ducked in time to keep from taking the heavy receptacle in the head. He heard it crash into something, followed by the bartender's pleading voice.

"Damn it, boys, can't you take your beef outside?"

The crew had backed to the far end of the bar and now one of them growled at the bartender, "Aw, pipe down."

There was blood on Mathis's mouth. He wiped it away and charged in with both fists swinging. Hard knuckles ripped the skin on Chalaron's left cheek, but he held his ground and drove another fist into Mathis's red mouth. Page backed away, using his shirt sleeve to smear blood across his face. Then he came in again and they stood close, and pounded each other.

THERE was no talk, nothing but the thud of fists and the shuffle of boots in the sawdust. Chalaron kept working on the face, landing one wicked blow after another, but he was taking punishment, too. A wild swing spun him half around and while he was off balance, Mathis chopped him on the back of the neck. Numb with pain, he went to his knees a moment, fighting the dizziness.

Moving fast, Mathis stepped in to lift a

knee under Chalaron's chin, but Chalaron saw it coming and twisted away. Mathis lost his balance and almost fell. This gave Chalaron time to get to his feet. He backed toward the bar, waiting for his head to clear. Mathis wasn't waiting. He grabbed up a chair and rushed in. Chalaron's head was still fuzzy, but he weaved and the chair missed him by inches. He heard it crash on the bartop, heard Mathis curse as he stood there.

Chalaron's neck and shoulders were still hurting, but the numbness was gone and his strength was coming back. He stepped away from the bar and slugged Mathis in the stomach, a long hard right that brought a grunt out of the man. Another blow just above the belt buckle sent Mathis to his knees. He pulled himself up and now breath was whistling past his battered lips.

There was a half filled mug of beer on the bar. Mathis grabbed for it, his eyes full of hate. The beer spilled as he brought the mug back, and then Chalaron closed in on him. They scuffled along the bar, Mathis still trying to use the heavy glass mug, but now Chalaron had hold of him.

With Mathis pinned against the mahogany, Chalaron got both hands on the man's arm, brought it down hard against the rim of the bar. Mathis howled and turned loose of the mug. He jabbed Chalaron on the nose, but Chalaron came back with a punishing right to the stomach.

Mathis dropped his arms and stood swaying, wide open for the next blow that smashed into his mouth. He went to his knees, and Chalaron got a handful of hair and pulled him up. He held Mathis with one hand, sledging him with the other, and thinking, "You've got to leave him so he knows he's been whipped."

At last Chalaron stopped and let him sag to the floor, and stood for a time, swaying slightly as he looked down into the man's battered features. The crew exchanged glances, and Lon Healey said, "You better have a drink, Clay."

Chalaron straightened and shook his

[*Turn page*]

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Ten factories coast to coast

Lee

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head. "Pour some water on him," he said, glancing down at Mathis. "And when he comes around, tell him I said lay off George Evans. That goes for the rest of you, too."

Mathis was still lying in the sawdust when Chalaron turned and left the saloon On the porch he paused to make a smoke, finding meager satisfaction in the knowledge that he had whipped Mathis. His neck was hurting and he massaged it, recalling the vicious blow Mathis had delivered

PEOPLE began drifting back into the saloon, some of them looking at Chalaron, but none of them speaking He could remember a time when they would have slapped him on the back and bought him a drink. But that was before he had gone to work for Chain Links.

Ralph Naylor was standing in the bank doorway when Chalaron crossed the street Once a cowman, Naylor had given up ranching and moved to town to please his wife, something Chalaron knew he would always regret.

A middle-aged man with iron-gray hair and a face still stained from years spent in the open, Naylor stepped back and smiled at Chalaron. "Saw your horse," he said, nodding toward the rack. "Figured you'd be over pretty soon."

Chalaron pulled his paycheck out of his shirt pocket and walked over to the cashier's cage. He indorsed the check and handed it to Naylor, saying, "Give me ten dollars, Ralph, and I'll deposit the rest of it to my account."

"Three years now," Naylor said, looking at the yellow piece of paper. "And you haven't missed a month coming in. You've got a nice little pile saved up, enough to cut loose from Wimbard and start out for yourself."

"What money I've saved isn't enough to buy the kind of an outfit I want."

The banker frowned at him. "You've already got the outfit, Clay. All you need do is buy some cattle and you're in business."

"On a shoestring, hemmed in on all sides by the Lanes and the Hunts, the Jones boys and the Deckers."

"Good folks, all of them. The kind that'll pitch in and give a man a hand."

"Yeah, I know, but it seems like the good folks have a habit of getting lost in the shuffle."

Naylor's frown deepened. "And what happens to the ones like Wimbard?"

"They get bigger," Charalon said with a dim smile

"I'll admit they have the breaks sometimes."

"They make their breaks instead of setting around waiting for them."

Naylor sighed. "I reckon it all depends on how you measure success. Anyway, I'm wondering what you'll do when the day comes and you have to ride against those folks who used to be your neighbors."

"They won't cross the river."

"They won't, but what about Wimbard?"

Chalaron shook his head. "Chain Links doesn't need more graze."

"Do you think Hugh is going to be satisfied with only half this valley?"

"Why not?"

"Because he's the kind that won't ever be satisfied, and he'll find some excuse to cross the river. He bought out a few outfits, ran out a few, till he got control of the west side. Sure, he's got enough graze for the cattle he has now, but suppose he brought in some more?"

"You do too much supposing, Ralph. Hugh's paying top wages and I know when payday comes around I'll have a check waiting for me. The price of feed goes up or the bottom falls out of the cattle market, and I don't have to worry because I'll get paid just the same."

"You look a lot like your dad, Clay, but you sure don't talk like him."

"Dad's dead," Chalaron said slowly, "and I saw him die." He looked beyond the banker, his eyes fastened on the big, iron safe, but he wasn't seeing it. He was remembering the storm, the days when the snow had piled high, when cattle, unable to find shelter, had died.

Then Chalaron caught himself and his smile came back. "If you'll give me my ten dollars, I'll get on, Ralph."

The banker's face was sober as he reached into the cash drawer and counted out the money. "Things have been drifting along, Clay, with Hugh down in Denver these past two months; but when he gets back, I've got a feeling something's going to happen."

"You've been listening to those lower valley folks, Ralph. Just because Chain Links is the biggest outfit around here, they can't get it out of their heads that Hugh won't try to take their half too. But they're wrong. Hugh's got all he wants."

"I hope you're right, Clay."

Chalaron picked up the money and went out, frowning as the banker's words went through his mind. He wondered if after working for Wimbard three years, he still didn't know what kind of man he was. Or was it because he didn't want to find out for sure, that he was afraid to look beneath the surface?

LEAVING his horse at the bank tie-rack, Chalaron walked down to the Shanamoa Café. A clock in the window down of Swenson's general store showed him that it was almost time for the train from Denver. According to Wimbard's last letter, he would be on it, returning from a pleasure trip that had kept him longer than the month he had planned to stay.

Jewell Evans was alone in the eating place when Chalaron went in. She usually had a smile for him, but today her smooth face was clouded. As always his pulse beat a little faster when he looked at her. She was wearing a starched white dress that fitted snugly over her hips and showed the fullness of her breasts.

"For a girl that's putting in her last day on the job," he said, "you're looking pretty down at the mouth."

"That's the way I feel, Clay," she said dully. "I've got to go on working here."

"Your dad's quitting his job?"

She nodded. "He said he just couldn't take it any longer."

Chalaron sat down on a stool and looked at her, aware of the troubled shadows in her blue eyes. She wasn't just pretty, he thought. She was really beautiful. Her hair, thick and waving, always reminded him of a red sunset. She and her family had been in Shanamoa less than two months, but Chalaron had met Jewell on the day of their arrival, and since then he'd been stopping often at the café.

"I told your father I'd see that he didn't have any more trouble with Chain Links," Chalaron said. "George'll be all right when he calms down."

Jewell still looked unhappy. "It wasn't just what happened today, Clay. Dad's always had his own business and he'll never be satisfied with anything else, no matter if he did go broke once and lose everything he had. I know he's not very dependable, Clay, but he's still my father."

"It'll all work out," he said gently. "In the meantime, there's worse places you could work than here."

Jewell glanced along the counter, faint bitterness in her eyes. "For three years I've had to work in some greasy spoon like this where half the men that come in want to take you out, and the boss expects you to smile and string them along."

"You make it sound pretty bad."

Her eyes came back to him and she said quickly. "It's not that I think I'm too good to be a waitress, Clay, or that I'm afraid of work. With mother sick most of the time, I've had to take care of the house and look after the twins, and I haven't minded that."

"Sure, I know how it is."

She kept looking at him, her face serious. "It's just that I'm sick of places like this, of having every cowpuncher that comes in try to get his hands on me."

"Does that include me?"

She smiled and laid her hand on his arm. "You're different, Clay. You're the nicest person I've ever met."

He put his hand over hers, and looking up into her face, said quietly, "Marry me, Jewell. That's one way of solving your problem."

She gave him a sober regard. "Thanks for the offer, Clay, but I like you too much to saddle you with my family, and that's what I'd be doing."

"Keep thinking about it," he said, smiling. "Maybe we can work something out."

"You're sweet, Clay. I like you a lot."

"I want more than that, Jewell. I want you to feel the same way I do."

"Don't talk about it now," she said softly. "Maybe someday—"

The long, lonesome sound of a train whistle reached them, reminding Chalaron that he should be down at the depot. Wimbard would be expecting him. But a stubborness rose in Chalaron then, and he thought, "He can find his way uptown without me."

"Your boss is coming home today, isn't he, Clay?" Jewell asked.

"Supposed to."

With more than casual interest, Jewell said, "What's he like, Clay?"

CHALARON reached for the menu. "You'll get a chance to find out. He never hits town that he don't come here for one of Joe's steaks."

Jewell looked out the window, her eyes thoughtful. "He owns the biggest ranch in the country, so he must have loads of money."

"And he's not bad looking," Chalaron said. "But don't be getting ideas."

She smiled, and then, sobering again, she said, "I was just thinking that if you were married to a man like that you wouldn't ever have to worry about anything."

"Maybe, but you'd have to be in love with him first."

"Couldn't a girl forget about love?"

"Not if she wanted any happiness."

"She'd have security. Wouldn't that be enough?"

"I don't think so," Charlaron said, watching her closely.

She was silent for a moment and then she looked at him again and smiled. "I suppose you're right, Clay."

He had the feeling that she wasn't convinced, and this displeased him. But her eyes were on him, sultry eyes that had a way of distracting a man, of making him forget to be critical. He said, "Besides, I guess Hugh has already got a wife by now. That's why he went to Denver."

"Oh, I hadn't heard."

Chalaron nodded and then he grinned at her. "I guess you'll have to settle for me."

She laughed lightly, and her laughter, he thought, was like everything else about her, different and exciting.

"I'll let you take me to the dance tonight, Clay."

"I was counting on it," he said. "Now you better rustle me some grub before your boss comes in and sees that I'm not spending any money."

She moved down the counter and Chalaron watched her, his pulse quickening again as he observed her liquid walk. He had never known a woman like this before, a woman who could turn his blood to fire.

The sound of the door opening pulled him around, and he saw Tom Lane enter the cafe. A chunky man of twenty-five, Lane had one of those light complexions that was always red from sun and wind. Once they had been close pals, but they'd drifted apart since Chalaron had gone to work for Chain Links.

"Hello, Tom."

Lane slid onto a stool next to Chalaron. He said, "Your boss just got off the train."

Chalaron nodded, his eyes on Jewell as she brought two glasses of water.

"Just a cup of coffee," Lane said, still looking at Chalaron.

When the girl had gone, Chalaron said, "Hugh have somebody with him?"

"Nope, by himself, and now that he's back, what's going to happen, Clay?"

"Nothing," Chalaron said. "Can't a man take a little vacation and come home without all of you getting worked up over it?"

"Not when that man is Hugh Wimbard."

Chalaron turned his water glass slowly. "Has he bothered you or any of your neighbors yet, Tom?"

Lane shook his head. "Not yet."

"Then what are you worrying about?"

"Because Hugh's been too busy up till now with the west side of the river. Just before he went away he bought the Haden place, the last outfit between us and him. Haden didn't really want to sell."

"So?"

"So Wimbard's been gone two months. Now he's home and I figure he's not one to set back and enjoy what he's already got."

Chalaron took a sip of his water and set the glass back on the counter. He said, "You could have him sized up wrong, Tom."

"I don't think so."

Chalaron looked at him, remembering the good times they'd had together as kids, hunting and fishing and playing pranks on Marsha. Tom had laughed a lot in those days, but now there was a soberness in his face that made him look older than he was.

"Stop worrying," Chalaron said with a reassuring smile. "Wimbard's not going to move in on you."

Lane looked straight at him. "Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?"

Chalaron stopped smiling, but before he could answer, Jewell Evans came up with a plate of food. Lane hadn't touched his coffee. He dropped a nickel on the counter and stalked out of the café.

JEWELL frowned at the full cup of coffee. "Was something wrong with it?"

"Not with the coffee," Chalaron murmured.

Another customer came in and the girl moved down the counter. This time Chalaron's eyes did not follow her. He scowled at the plate of food, but he wasn't seeing it. He was remembering Tom Lane's words, wondering why they should upset him.

When Chalaron had finished eating, he told Jewell he would see her later, and left the café. In front of the place he paused to build a smoke, his straying glance settling on Bender's Bar. Page Mathis was standing on the porch, and Chalaron felt the impact of the man's cold stare.

Lon Healey, coming out of the hotel a few doors down, paused to glance along the street. He saw Chalaron and angled toward him. "Hugh's at the hotel, Clay. Room ten. He wants to see you."

"I'll go over," Chalaron said.

"Put on a little weight while he was gone," Healey said, grinning. "That's what sitting on your rump does to you. I wouldn't mind trying it for a while, though."

Chalaron left the puncher standing there and crossed to the hotel. He wondered why he hadn't met Wimbard at the depot. He had seen him off on the train and he had planned to meet him when he came back. But there in the café, listening to the train whistle, a sudden perverseness had taken hold of him.

Five thousand head rushed closer, bawling lustily into the darkness

Number ten was on the front overlooking the street. The best room in the hotel, Chalaron thought as he rapped on the door.

"Come in, Clay," Hugh Wimbard said pleasantly.

He was in his shirtsleeves, bent over the washstand, water glistening on his ruddy face. He wasn't a tall man, but he was well built, wide of shoulder. His hair was black and heavy with no sign of gray. Chalaron knew Wimbard was forty-five, but he didn't look it. He dried his face and came across the room, smiling as he held out his hand.

"Figured you'd be down to meet me, Clay."

"I got tied up."

"With some gal, probably." Wimbard chuckled. "Anyway, it's good to see you; good to be back."

Chalaron pulled a straight chair around and sat down, folding his arms across the back. "How were things in the milehigh city?"

Wimbard's suitcase was on the bed. He got a clean shirt out, talking while he put it on. "I stayed at the Windsor Hotel on Larimer Street. Quite a place."

"But you didn't find what you went after?"

The Chain Links owner smiled as he buttoned his shirt. "I had a good time, caught a few shows at the Palace, played a lot of poker at Murphy's Exchange, and took some women out. Plenty of them around, Clay, but none that I liked enough to bring home with me."

"Maybe you're too hard to please."

"Maybe, but the woman who comes to Chain Links has got to be somebody special." Wimbard walked over to the window and stood looking down onto the street. "Maybe I waited too long, Clay. Guess I should have been looking for a wife when I was your age, but I was too busy building a ranch. Seemed like that's all I could think about."

Chalaron studied him, aware of the intense expression in his eyes, of the knots of muscles along his jaw.

"I figured I'd got to the place where I could start taking it easy," Wimbard went on, still staring out the window. "Figured I could let you look after things while I sat back and enjoyed myself. Now, I don't know."

Chalaron took his time fashioning a smoke. He said, "A lot of folks are wondering what your next move will be."

Wimbard swung away from the window to put searching eyes on Chalaron. "Are you wondering, Clay?"

"Why should I?"

THE COWMAN'S GAZE remained on Chalaron's face. "We've hit it off, Clay right from the first, ever since that day you left the lower valley and came over to sign on with me. You're a good man, one with plenty of savvy, otherwise I wouldn't have shoved you up so fast."

Chalaron drew on his cigarette. He watched Wimbard, wondering what he was building up to.

"You've earned your wages, Clay; you've worked hard, proved you could handle yourself and be tough if need be. But I can't forget that you came from the lower valley, that once you were pretty thick with those folks." He paused, and watching Chalaron closely, spoke in a low tone, "What would you do if it came to a real showdown?"

"What brought this on?" Chalaron asked curiously.

Wimbard kept looking at him. "Lon told me you had a little trouble today with some folks camping on my grass. He said you were pretty easy on them."

"It was just a man and his wife."

"Sure, but we've had them kind before and you know how I handle them."

"They'll be gone by tomorrow."

"Maybe, and maybe not. I didn't get where I am by feeling sorry for people."

"I know."

Wimbard frowned. "It's nothing to get worked up over, and maybe I'm too suspicious, but I can't help but wonder if you'll go soft on me."

"Is that the reason you've kept Page Mathis around?" Chalaron's voice was rough with temper.

Wimbard smiled thinly. "I like to have

an ace in the hole, Clay. Page is a little too quick to jump the gun, but he can be counted on in a tight."

Chalaron walked over to the dresser and put his cigarette out in an ash tray. He said, scowling, "It's good to know where I stand."

Wimbard's smile broadened. "Don't get hot under the collar. Like I said, you're a good man and up till now you've played your cards right. Maybe that little deal today doesn't prove anything and maybe that sour mood you've been in for the past three or four months doesn't either. On the other hand it might mean you're getting fed up with Chain Links."

"When I get fed up," Chalaron said, "I'll let you know."

"Good enough." Wimbard came over and slapped him on the back. "Let's forget it and have a drink. I've got a bottle in my suitcase."

The whiskey was good. It warmed Chalaron and relaxed him.

Wimbard put the cork back in the bottle, hit it hard with the heel of his hand, and said, "How did you and Page make out while I was gone?"

"Lon didn't tell you?"

The cowman shook his head.

"We had a fight a little while ago, a real knock-down and drag-out."

"You whip him?"

"Yeah."

"Knew it was coming," Wimbard said with a touch of amusement. "Must have been some show. I wish I could have seen it." He held the bottle up, staring thoughtfully at the red label. "A licking is something pretty hard for a man like Page to take."

"Meaning?"

"Page might fare better with a shooting-iron."

Chalaron felt his temper coming up again. He said thinly, "Is that supposed to put a chill in me?"

"Don't want to see you getting careless, Clay, that's all," Wimbard said, grinning. "Cool off and let's have another drink."

"One's enough."

Wimbard shrugged. He started to uncork the bottle, then changed his mind and dropped it in the suitcase, asking, "Anything else happened since I've been gone?"

Chalaron reached for his tobacco sack again. "New family moved in, that's about all. Fellow named George Evans. He's got a wife and two kids and a grown daughter. She's working at Joe's place."

"Speaking of Joe's place, I've been hungry for one of his steaks ever since I left."

"I've got to get a haircut," Chalaron said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'll see you later."

WHEN CHALARON left the barbershop, he crossed to the feed store, where George Evans was sitting on a bale of hay. Evans had removed his badge, but Chalaron didn't let on that he noticed.

"I had a talk with Page and the rest of the boys," Chalaron said. "They won't cause you any more trouble, George."

Evans was chewing on a piece of straw. He took it from his mouth and said, "I know danged well they won't. I'm through being constable of this burg."

"You could hold off till something else comes along," Chalaron said patiently. "That way Jewell could go ahead and quit tonight like she planned."

"She'll just have to wait a spell," Evans said in a stubborn tone. "At least she won't have to worry about some likkered-up cowpuncher taking a gun to her. Besides, she won't have to work there much longer. I'm going to get lined out in something good."

The man was weak and shiftless, Chalaron knew, and there was nothing to be gained by arguing with him. He started to move on just as Ralph Naylor came out of Bender's place and turned down the street toward them. There was urgency in the banker's walk.

Stopping at the edge of the feed-store porch, Naylor looked at Evans. "George, you'd better go down to Bender's and see if you can't get Ben Lane out of there."

"You're talking to the wrong man," Evans said. "I resigned over an hour ago."

"What's up, Ralph?" Chalaron asked.

Naylor let Evans see the disgust in his eyes before he turned away from him, and spoke to Chalaron. "Tom Lane's been pouring whisky down himself like it was water, and now he's starting to get ornery."

"That doesn't sound like Tom," Chalaron said, frowning. "What's eating on him?"

Naylor shook his head. "All I know is that he's guzzling booze and making a lot of wild talk against Chain Links. Most of your crew is in there, Clay, and they aren't going to take much more from Tom. I tried to talk to the young cuss, but he wouldn't listen. I'd hate to see him get his fool head knocked off."

"I'll see if I can get him out of there before somebody swings one on him."

Turning toward the saloon, Chalaron saw Hugh Wimbard come out of the hotel and pause on the porch to light a cigar. The cattleman wore a cream-colored stetson, a dark suit and expensive boots. He was an impressive man, regardless of whether you liked him or not. He stood with his shoulders back, seeming to enjoy the uneasy glances being cast in his direction.

By the time Chalaron reached Bender's place, Wimbard had left the porch and was crossing toward the Shanamoa Café. Jewell would be there to serve him, and thinking of this, Chalaron felt a vague disturbance. Wimbard was looking for a wife and where could he find a more desirable woman than Jewell?

On the porch of the saloon, Chalaron stood for a moment and stared thoughtfully at Wimbard. Then, remembering he had something else to think about right now, he pushed through the batwings.

TOM LANE, his hat shoved back and his face flushed, had one end of the bar all to himself. There was a half filled glass in front of him and he was talking in a loud voice, his words directed at no one in particular. "The skunk smell in here is almost more than a man can stand."

Most of the patrons were looking on in amusement, some of them grinning broadly while the Chain Links crew scowled into their whisky glasses. Chalaron saw no sign of Page Mathis, but the rest of the boys were there, and it was plain they found nothing funny in Lane's drunken talk.

Lon Healey banged his glass down and stepped back. "I've had about enough out of that yahoo."

"Cool off, Lon," Chalaron said, moving up beside him. "I'll quiet Tom down."

"Somebody better," Healey growled. "He's been pouring it on us long enough."

Chalaron went on down the bar and he was smiling as he stopped beside Lane. "A man shouldn't drink alone, Tom."

Lane weaved and blinked his eyes. "Who the hell are you?"

"Don't give me that stuff," Chalaron said mildly. "You know who I am."

Lane put his back against the bar, squinting at Chalaron. "You do look kinda familiar, all right." His voice was thick, his eyes red and full of devilment. "Yeah, I recognize you now. You're the fellow that used to live on the outfit next to me. Our folks come into the country about the same time. You and me went to school together. We used to be friends."

"We're still friends, Tom."

Lane's mouth slanted. "Nobody who's a friend of Chain Links is a friend of mine."

Chalaron kept smiling. "I just work for the outfit, Tom."

"Yeah, and that's something I can't savvy." Lane shook his head. He was still weaving and now he took hold of the bar to steady himself. "Nope, I can't savvy it at all. Man ups and leaves his own outfit and throws in with a pack of coyotes."

Down the bar, Lon Healey muttered something. Sober, Lane could take care of himself all right, but in his present condition he'd just get his fool head beat off, and Chalaron didn't want to see that. Tom wasn't naturally quarrelsome. He had always been well liked, easy-going.

The room was quieter than it had been before Chalaron came in and he could feel the eyes of the crowd. Uneasiness stirred in him, but he kept smiling at Lane.

"Marsha sent me to fetch you home,

Tom," Chalaron said, hoping the lie would work. "You ready to go?"

Lane turned his back on Chalaron and reached for the glass on the bar. Then he looked around, frowning as if something had just occurred to him. "I plumb forgot about Marsha. Promised her I'd take her to the dance."

"We've just about got time to get out there and back," Chalaron said. "We'd better hustle."

"Yeah, I don't want her to miss that shindig, but I've got to get a bottle to take along."

Healey and the others were watching them, but Lane seemed to have forgotten they were here. He bought a pint of whisky and lurched against Chalaron, grinning as his mood changed. "Clay, you old son-of-a-gun."

CHALARON breathed easier when they were outside and he had Lane aboard his horse. Tom wobbled in the saddle, laughing as he almost fell and Chalaron had to make a grab for him. When they passed the livery stable, Chalaron saw Page Mathis hunkered on his bootheels in front of the place and again Clay felt Mathis's eyes on him, narrow and full of hate.

Then the town was behind them and Chalaron forgot about Mathis. He looked at Lane, grinning as he watched him weave in the saddle.

"Hold up a minute, Clay," Lane said, trying to get the cork out of his bottle. "We gotta have a little drink. A man gets tired of working and sweating and worrying all the time. Come on, Clay, take a good snort and let's have some fun."

Chalaron took a small drink and passed the bottle back. "We'd better get along, Tom. You don't want to keep Marsha waiting."

"That's right, Clay. She's a mighty fine gal, one in a million, I figure. Wait till we get to that shindig. We'll show them some fancy stepping. You coming with us, Clay?"

"Sure, I'll be there."

They rode on and Chalaron stayed close, ready to reach for Lane if he started to fall. Tom Lane was in a mellow mood now, the sober lines gone from his face. He swayed toward Chalaron and slapped him affectionately on the back. "This is like old times, Clay, you and me riding along here together. Boy, them were the days."

"We had some high times all right, Tom."

"We sure did," Lane said, his voice growing thicker. "What was that old song we used to sing?"

"I've forgotten, Tom."

"Me, too, but we used to think we was pretty hot. Damn it, how'd them words go? Something 'bout an old hen."

"I remember now." Chalaron began to sing. "There was an old hen and she had a wooden leg, and every time she cackled she laid another egg. Oh, she laid more eggs than any hen on the farm, and another little drink wouldn't do us any harm."

Lane joined in on the last and they were both laughing by the time the song ended.

"Reminds me of that first dance we took in," Chalaron said. "That was the time you kept siccing old man Lawson's girl Ollie May onto me. You remember Ollie May, Tom?"

"How could I forget?" Tom laughed and slapped his thigh. "With those buck teeth of hers, that gal could have et corn out of a jug."

Chalaron felt better than he had in a long while.

It was dark by the time they reached Lost Creek, and Tom, having finished the bottle, was no longer in any shape to carry on a conversation. Chalaron stared reflectively along the stream and then he hipped around, frowning as he looked along their back trail. He thought he heard the sound of a horse, but there was no sign of one.

Shrugging, he rode on, and as long as they were moving he kept hearing the sound now and then. When he stopped to listen the sound stopped until he decided he was imagining things. "Must be getting spooky," he muttered. "No reason for anybody to be trailing us."

When they passed his old outfit, he looked at the house, remembering his talk with Marsha: "It's a good house, Clay. Strong and well built. The place could be restocked . . ."

He pushed those thoughts from his mind, telling himself he was letting sentiment soften him. Three years ago he had made up his mind what he wanted, and he wasn't turning back.

WHEN THEY RODE into the yard of the Lane house, Marsha appeared in the doorway. She took one look at her brother and came quickly outside.

"He's all right," Chalaron told her. "Just had a couple of drinks too many."

"Help me get him to bed, Clay."

Once more Chalaron glanced into the darkness, certain that he caught the rattle of a hoof against stone. It could be a neighboring rancher on his way home; nothing to get uneasy about.

Carrying Tom inside, Chalaron put him down on his bed and helped Marsha remove his boots.

"He'll be all right in the morning," Chalaron said.

Marsha rose and moved to the foot of the bed. "He's been driving himself too hard, Clay. Maybe this is what he needed."

They went into the living room and Chalaron looked about him, remembering that he hadn't been in this house in a long time. Once he had come here for Sunday dinners and. . . . He swung toward the door, saying, "I've got to get back."

"Thanks for bringing him home, Clay."

She walked to the door and stood there until he had gone. As he rode back down the creek, Chalaron was thinking of her and of her brother. Then he remembered he was taking Jewell to the dance and knew he would have to hurry.

Traveling at a lope, he came to his outfit on down the creek. He had no intentions of stopping, but as he rode across the yard he turned his head to look at the house. It was dark and silent, a place of moonlight and shadows. The door held his attention. He could have sworn that when he and Tom passed it had been closed. Now it was open, and from inside he caught the red glow of a cigarette.

His stomach muscles tightened and he reached for his gun, but he wasn't quick enough. There was movement in the doorway, a brief glimpse of a shadowy form just before the bullet struck him. He heard the sound, loud in the silence, and felt pain as lead smashed into his left shoulder. The impact swept him out of the saddle and onto the ground.

The fall knocked the breath out of him and he lay there in the weeds, fighting a sickness in his stomach, knowing that he had to get to his feet. From the doorway of the house the gun hammered again and a second bullet screamed past Chalaron's head. He couldn't see who was doing the shooting; the house was a shapeless blob before his eyes.

Half blinded by pain, he staggered up and went running, reeling across the yard. He was still holding onto his gun, but he knew he didn't stand a chance here in the open with moonlight full upon him. There was brush and darkness along the creek. If he could reach it he might be able to make a stand.

The distance was not great, but Chalaron's strength was going fast. He had a glimpse of the man as he stepped out of the doorway, trying to cut Chalaron down before he reached the protection of the creek. Without raising his gun, Chalaron fired. It was a wild shot, but it drove the ambusher back to the house, put caution in him for a moment.

Just short of the creek bank, Chalaron stumbled. He fell and rolled the rest of the way into the dense willow thickets. The brush ripped his shirt and scratched his face, but the branches offered some protection. He lay there breathing hard, waiting for his head to clear.

He was sure it was Mathis up there at the house; it couldn't be anybody else. The man must have followed him when he left town with Tom. He had trailed them to the Lane place and then come back here to wait, knowing that Chalaron would most likely return this way.

Chalaron tried to pull himself up to a sitting position, but he couldn't move. His head was spinning and the pain was getting worse. He clamped his teeth against it and tried once more to rise. The effort left him weak, wet with sweat. He lay there holding onto a gun that he didn't have the strength to use. A sense of desperation took hold of him.

There was no more shooting, nothing but silence now. Then from down the creek bank came a sound, brush popping as someone moved through the darkness. Chalaron listened, knowing the killer was coming for him, that he had left the house and was working his way through the brush. Closing in to finish me off, Chalaron thought, and knew real fear for the first time in his life.

Lying there sick and helpless, it seemed to Chalaron that it was taking the killer a long time to find him. He wanted to yell at the man, tell him to come on and get it over with, but darkness was closing in on Chalaron now. Just before he lost consciousness, he thought he heard the pound of hoofs, but he decided it was only the cold fingers of panic drumming inside his head.

FOR A LONG TIME Chalaron was lost in some far-away place where the wind blew cold and the night was everlasting. Alone he walked through darkness that was filled with phantom shapes, lean gray bodies that he recognized now as wolves. There must have been fifty of them, huge beasts that snarled and snapped and hungered for him.

Chalaron began to run and the wolves ran too, their red eyes glowing in the darkness. He didn't look back, but he knew they were close on his heels. Any minute now one of them would leap and pull him down. . . .

Chalaron came awake with a groan. He was lying on his back, naked to the waist, and the crazy thought ran through his mind, "Those damned wolves got my shirt."

Close beside him he heard a voice gently urging him to lie still, and he realized then there had been no wolves, that the terrifying experience was something that had taken place in his fevered brain. He began to laugh, a wild, crazy sound that continued until the pain struck at him, taking him back to that world of darkness.

At last the pain let up and his head was clear. He saw Marsha sitting beside his bed and knew it was her voice he had heard during those brief periods of wakefulness. She had stayed close to him for a long time, bathing his face, changing the bandage on his shoulder.

When she saw he was awake, she smiled and the lines of strain left her face. She said, "You're going to be all right, Clay."

He lay still, looking at her, and when he spoke his voice sounded strange to him. "How long have I been here?"

"Three days. You've lost a lot of blood. Tom and I were afraid you weren't going to pull through."

Chalaron said thoughtfully, "How come the ambusher didn't finish me off?"

Marsha rose and began straightening

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his covers. She talked while she worked. "I hurried over to your place as soon as I heard the shooting, found you lying in the brush along the creek. There was no one else around."

"You scared him off," Chalaron said.

"Who would want to kill you, Clay?"

"Page Mathis," Chalaron said, grimly. "He wanted to pay me off for a licking I gave him."

"If you're thinking about going after him, Clay, you'd better forget it. After what you've been through you'll have to take it easy for a while."

"Does Wimbard know I'm here?"

She shook her head. "Tom and I decided we'd better not say anything to anybody. We were afraid that if the ambusher found out you were alive, he might come here looking for you."

Chalaron thought of Jewell, remembering that he had been going to take her to a dance. She must be wondering what had happened to him.

He didn't realize how weak he was until he tried to sit up. The effort brought sweat out on him and he lay back, knowing that it was going to take time before he could sit a saddle again. Bitterly and silently he cursed Page Mathis.

The next day Chalaron got up and sat in a chair, shaking his head when Marsha tried to talk him out of it. The girl told him it was too soon, but Chalaron knew he wasn't going to get his strength back lying in bed.

NOW THAT he was better, Marsha did not spend as much time with him and Chalaron missed her presence in the room. He remembered the way she had taken care of him, the cool feel of her fingers as she bathed his face. Idleness was fraying his nerves.

He got up and tested his legs by taking a few steps. They were wobbly and when he walked the sweat broke out on his face. He took hold of a straight chair, aware of the way his hands were trembling. But when he had rested, he tried it again, forcing himself to move about the room. He passed the dresser and had a look at himself in the mirror. His face was drawn, haggard, and black with beard. He grimaced and turned away.

That day he ate his first good meal, and he could feel his strength coming back. After dinner he borrowed Tom's razor and shaved, using the water that Marsha heated for him. She brought him a towel and stood by, smiling while he dried his face.

"You're just like Tom," she said. "There's always some soap that he doesn't find."

Chalaron grinned at her. "I did good getting the whiskers off."

Marsha took the towel, still smiling as she stepped close to dab at one of his ears. Her body, soft and warm, was against Chalaron, and the contact filled him with a sudden yearning. She must have sensed the change in him for she looked up quickly, sobering as her eyes met his. For a long moment they stood that way, neither moving, neither speaking. Then Chalaron put his arms around her, drew her close and kissed her hard on the mouth. She didn't try to pull away. Instead, she clung to him, responding in a way that caused Chalaron's heart to leap.

At last he lifted his head and stood looking down at her, puzzled by the feeling she had stirred in him. "I shouldn't have done that, Marsha."

She stepped back, her eyes troubled for a moment, and then she let him see a faint smile. "It's all right, Clay. It's just that we've been together so much these last few days."

Chalaron walked over to the window and stood looking out into the sunlight. The room was quiet and then he heard Marsha saying, "Don't let something that didn't mean anything upset you. After all, we're both human."

He swung around and looked at her. "I always thought that when you kissed a man it would be for keeps."

She laughed lightly. "I told you we all change when we grow up. Don't look so serious, Clay. You're in love with Jewell Evans and I'm in love with Johnny Hunt."

Chalaron stared at her. "I didn't know about you and Johnny."

"We've been going together a long time."

"I'm glad to hear that, Marsha," Chalaron said, but he wasn't glad; he felt a touch of unhappiness. Like Marsha had said, he was in love with Jewell, so what was wrong with him anyway? "They don't come any better than Johnny," Chalaron went on. "He'll make you a good husband."

Marsha turned toward the door just as hoofbeats sounded outside and came to a stop. A moment later, Tom Lane entered the house, his face troubled as he looked at Marsha. "Well, Wimbard's made his first move."

"What happened, Tom?" Marsha asked with quick concern.

Tom walked over to the water bucket, talking as he reached for the dipper. "Wimbard sent word for all of us on this side of the river to meet him at the Hunt place. He had a proposition to offer us, he said." Tom paused to send a heated glance at Chalaron. "You know what it was, Clay?"

Chalaron shook his head, uneasiness stirring in him.

TOM HAD his drink and hung the dipper back on its nail, all the while looking at Chalaron. "Wimbard wants to buy us out, offered us about half what our places are worth. When all of us turned him down, he told us we'd better think it over because he meant to have this side of the river, too."

"But why?" Chalaron said, frowning. "He doesn't need more graze."

Tom's mouth twisted. "What he needs and what he wants are two different things."

Chalaron said stubbornly, "I've worked for him three years, and he's never said anything about crossing the river. Anyway, if you all turned him down, there's not much he can do."

"You mean," Tom said, staring hard at Chalaron, "that after all this time you don't know Wimbard better than that?"

Defensively Chalaron said, "He's never killed anybody or burned them out to get what he wants."

"So far he hasn't had to, because the outfits he's gone after haven't had the guts to buck him. They've all given in without a fight, taken a lot less than their places were worth, and pulled out. But it won't be that way when he crosses the Shanamoa, Clay."

Chalaron walked over and took his hat down from a peg on the wall. His gunbelt was there, too, and while he was strapping it on, Marsha came over to him. She said in a worried tone, "Clay, you're in no shape to ride yet."

"I'm all right," he said. "I want to talk to Wimbard."

Tom was checking his gun when Chalaron left to saddle his horse. His left arm was a little stiff, and after going without his gun for several days, he was now conscious of its weight. Marsha was standing in the doorway when he rode out. She waved and Chalaron lifted his hand to her, thinking that she'd make Johnny Hunt a good wife.

Reaching Shanamoa, Chalaron pulled up at the café. He wanted to see Jewell, let her know he was all right before he went out to Chain Links. The café was empty except for Joe Richards, the owner of the place, who was sitting on the end stool drinking a cup of coffee.

"I ain't seen Jewell since last Saturday," Joe said in answer to Chalaron's question. "Got her pay and said she'd be back Sunday, but she ain't showed up. Guess she decided to quit." The restaurant man shook his head sadly. "Best waitress I ever had. I sure hate to lose her."

Chalaron went out. He got his horse and rode to the edge of town where George Evans had rented a small frame house. George was sitting in the doorway, whittling on a piece of pine. When he saw Chalaron he put his knife away and stood up, brushing shavings off his trousers.

"Been wondering what happened to you, Clay. Thought maybe you'd up and left the country."

"Ran into a little trouble," Chalaron said, not bothering to give him the details. "Is Jewell home?"

"Nope, she went for a ride on her new

horse." There was a secretive light in Evans's eyes. "Prettiest little filly you ever saw, that horse. A present from Mr. Wimbard."

Chalaron was reaching for his tobacco sack. He stopped and stared at Evans in surprise. "Wimbard gave her a horse?"

"Yep. He said he had plenty of them, and seeing as how Jewell didn't have no way to get around, he gave her one. A pretty important man, that Wimbard."

Angry, Chalaron turned away. He said over his shoulder, "Tell Jewell I was here."

Evans sat back down, smiling.

FOLLOWING the wagon ruts that led to Chain Links, Chalaron rode deep in thought, troubled by what George Evans had told him. The town was far behind when he saw a rider up ahead appear on a rise and come down the trail toward him. It was the first time he had seen Jewell on a horse, but he knew it was she, even at a distance. She was wearing half boots, a fringed riding skirt, and a white blouse. Chalaron had never seen the outfit before, but like everything else Jewell wore, it caught a man's eye.

He watched her draw closer, thinking, "The road she's traveling leads to Chain Links and nowhere else."

When Jewell recognized him, her eyes brightened and she put her horse into a lope. "Oh, Clay," she cried. "It's so good to see you."

He reined in and waited until she had brought her mount to a stop close to him. There were doubts and suspicions in his mind, but all he could think of right now was how beautiful she was, how much he had missed her. She sat her saddle for a moment and looked at him, so close that her leg touched his. Then she swayed toward him and Chalaron, his pulse racing, took her in his arms. He held her and kissed her, stirred by the pressure of her lips. Her mouth, warm and soft, returned his kisses with a hunger that matched his own.

At last she pulled away, her face troubled. "Oh, Clay, where on earth have you been? What happened to you?"

He studied her, his face sober. "I've been laid up with a bullet wound."

"You were shot?" Jewell's eyes widened with fright. "But why didn't you let me know? I've been worried sick."

"Have you, Jewell?"

"Why, of course!" Her eyes were filled with concern. "I didn't know what to think when you didn't come to take me to the dance. You know how people talk. Some of them said you had a girl across the river, that you had gotten drunk and run off with her."

"You didn't believe that, Jewell."

She laid her hand on his arm. "I haven't known you very long, Clay, and it just never occurred to me that anything could have happened to you."

Chalaron kept looking at her, his eyes moving over her face. "I stopped by the café. Joe told me he hadn't seen you since Saturday."

"I quit, Clay."

"But your dad's out of a job."

She moistened her lips, and Chalaron had the feeling she was finding it hard to tell him something. Her face averted, she said, "Clay, Mr. Wimbard has asked me to marry him."

"Marry him?" Chalaron stared at her. "But you've known him less than a week."

"I know, but he asked me a while ago. When you didn't come back, I let him take me to the dance. Maybe I shouldn't have, but I did. He saw me home, invited me out to his ranch. We've seen a lot of each other the last few days."

Chalaron reached out and took hold of her arms, gripping them hard. "Jewell, you don't love him. You couldn't."

There was a mist in her eyes. "I've decided to forget about love, Clay, about you and me, and what I'd really like to have."

"Jewell, you love me. I know you do."

"Please, Clay, don't make me admit it."

Chalaron said roughly, "You're talking crazy."

"I suppose I am, Clay, but I told him I'd marry him and I'm going to do it."

"You'd do that to get away from Joe's place?"

She shook her head. "It's not just that, Clay. It's a lot of things. It's thinking of my mother, who's had it hard all her life, and of my father, who'll never hold a job to support her and the kids. Mr. Wimbard has agreed to set him up in some kind of business." She broke off, silenced by the expression in Chalaron's eyes.

"Oh, Clay," she cried miserably. "I know what you must think of me, but it's something I've got to do."

Chalaron felt a sickness deep inside him. He said dully, "When is the wedding?"

"Tonight."

His hands tightened on her arms again. "Call it off, Jewell, before you do something you'll be sorry for the rest of your life."

"It's too late, Clay. I've given him my word. Maybe if you hadn't gone away—" She paused, her shoulders slumping. "There's no use talking about that now."

Chalaron stared at her, searching for words to convince her she was making a mistake. But he knew she had made up her mind, that nothing he could say would change it. He took his hands off her arms and sat looking at her in silence.

"I hope you'll try to understand," she said in a low, troubled tone. "I hope you won't think I'm just a cheap—" She didn't finish. Her lips were trembling and her eyes were wet. Without another word she lifted her reins and quickly rode away.

RIDING on toward Chain Links, Chalaron kept his hand close to his gun, thinking of Mathis, knowing the man might shoot fast if they met. But he failed to spot any of the crew on the range and there was no sign of them at headquarters.

He rode slowly across the yard, eying the bunkhouse, the corrals and the barn. There was only silence. He looked at Wimbard's big log house with its rock chimney and long front porch, remembering how impressed he had been the first time he had seen the place, recalling the admiration he had felt for Wimbard.

That had been three years ago and Chalaron had just lost his parents.

Jewell was here to see him, Chalaron thought, so he must be around somewhere.

While he was dismounting at the edge of the yard, Wimbard appeared on the porch. He started down the steps and drew up, staring at Chalaron in surprise. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said.

Chalaron went up the walk, an odd, tight feeling inside him as he looked at Wimbard. The man was bareheaded, his ruddy face covered with a faint sheen of perspiration. He said, "Where the hell have you been?"

"Your boy, Mathis, was waiting for me in the dark." Chalaron touched his shoulder where the bullet had struck him.

"You sure it was Page?"

"It couldn't have been anybody else." Chalaron's face was hard. "I'm looking for him, Hugh."

"He's been gone a couple of days." Wimbard seemed about to say more, and turned suddenly evasive. "I sent him over to the county seat to look over some cattle a man's got for sale."

"Thinking of bringing in more cows, Hugh?"

"I won't pass up a good buy."

Chalaron kept looking at him. "You haven't got enough graze for any more stock."

Wimbard's gaze swung toward the lower valley. "There's plenty of grass on the other side of the river, Clay."

"But it's not for sale, Hugh, and it never will be."

"I know," Wimbard murmured, a dark, intent expression in his eyes. "But there're ways of getting what you want." He caught himself then and smiled as he sat down, nodding toward the chair next to his. "Sit down, Clay. You look like you'd been dragged through a knot hole."

Chalaron remained standing, his eyes pinned on Wimbard. "I guess I've been closing my eyes to things, Hugh, refusing to see you as everybody else does. I tried to tell myself they didn't like you just because you had more than they had. But it's not only that."

"Keep talking," Wimbard said quietly. "Get it off your chest."

"I thought," Chalaron went on, "that

you'd stop when you got to the river; at least that's what I kept telling myself. When you came back from Denver, you had your mind made up to move into the lower valley, but you weren't sure if I'd string along, so you tried to feel me out there in the hotel."

"Because I had a hunch you'd go soft on me," Wimbard sneered.

"I haven't gone soft," Chalaron said steadily. "I'm just getting straightened out, finding I don't want what I thought I did."

"What do you want?"

"To be able to live with myself."

WIMBARD'S mouth was thin with contempt. "I don't know how I could have been so damned wrong about you, but I thought you wanted to get somewhere, that you had a lot of savvy." Wimbard broke off, making an impatient gesture.

"I told you when I was fed up," Chalaron said, "I'd let you know."

For a moment, Wimbard studied him in silence. Then he said, "All right, Clay, if that's the way you want it. I was figuring on you taking over here, running things for me. I'm getting married tonight."

"Yeah, that's what I heard." There was a touch of bitterness in Chalaron's voice. "You move fast, don't you, Hugh?"

Wimbard smiled at him. "I went all the way to Denver to find a wife, and if I'd just waited a little while, I could have saved myself the trip. She's what I've been looking for, something special."

For the first time since he had known the man, Chalaron had the urge to drive a fist into his face. He fought down his anger and said, "Better forget about the lower valley, Hugh. You might run into a lot of trouble down there."

Wimbard remained in his chair, still smiling. "I've run into trouble before. It won't bother me. All I'm hoping is that you don't throw in with those old friends of yours. I'd sure hate to look at you through the smoke."

"I'll keep that in mind," Chalaron said.

He cut his extra horse from the corral, picked up his warbag at the bunkhouse, and headed for town. The discontent, the unrest that had been nagging at him for months, was gone, but there was something else now, something that went deeper and had to do with Jewell. He had never been in love before and he wondered if he was in love with Jewell. Was it that or was it something closer to passion?

All he knew for sure was that he was losing her, that she was marrying Wimbard tonight. When Chalaron thought about it, somehow he couldn't blame Jewell too much. She'd never had things easy; she'd had to work to support her family, stay home and do without. Wimbard could give her everything she wanted, everything except love.

It was almost dark by the time he reached Shanamoa. He passed the Evans house and looked at it, thinking, "She's in there getting ready. In a little while, Wimbard will come for her."

He left his horses and his warbag at the livery stable and walked down the street toward Bender's Bar. He saw Ralph Naylor locking the door of his bank, but Chalaron went on, in no mood to talk to Naylor or anyone else.

The bartender had the saloon all to himself. He set out a bottle and a glass, saying, "If Page comes in here looking for trouble, have it outside, will you?"

"Sure," Chalaron said absently, and reached for the bottle.

The bartender said, "I hear your boss made those lower valley folks an offer earlier today."

Chalaron tossed off a drink and set the glass down hard.

"I didn't come here to gab," he said in a flat voice.

The man in the white apron scowled and moved away.

The whisky warmed Chalaron's stomach. He stood looking at his empty glass and then he reached for the bottle again. With his hand on it, he stopped and scowled at his reflection in the back-bar mirror.

Hell, standing here guzzling booze wasn't going to get him anywhere.

HE LAID DOWN some change and stalked out of the saloon, pausing on the porch to survey the street. It was full dark now and lamps had been lighted in some of the buildings. A block down, a man walked up the steps of the church. Chalaron supposed it was the preacher, going there to get ready for the ceremony.

Farther down he could see the Evans house, and while he was staring at it thoughtfully, George Evans and his wife and two children came along the street. When they reached the saloon, George stopped, and his wife said, "Now don't be long."

"I won't," George promised. "Want to see a man in here and I'll meet you when you come back from taking the boys down to Mrs. Purdy's."

Mrs. Evans went on.

Chalaron was standing in the shadows, so that Evans didn't see him until he came on the porch. The ex-constable stopped, and seeing that Chalaron's gaze was on his wife and children, said, "She's leaving the twins with Mrs. Purdy, so we can—"

"Go to the wedding?" Chalaron cut in. "That's right, you've got to give the bride away, haven't you, George?"

Evans looked uncomfortable. "Now, don't be sore, Clay. I know you was sort of sweet on Jewell, but you've just got to make the best of it. Come on in and I'll buy you a drink."

Chalaron gave him a thin smile. "Things are looking up for you, aren't they, George?"

Evans flushed and went on into the saloon.

Chalaron remained on the porch a moment longer, staring at the Evans house with thoughtful eyes, knowing that Jewell would be alone now. Suddenly he stepped to the walk and turned toward the livery stable, moving with haste. When he had saddled his horse, he mounted and rode straight to the Evans house. Leaving his mount under a cottonwood, he glanced up and down the street, then went quickly to the front door.

Jewell was smiling when she answered his knock, but when she saw who it was, her smile faded. "Clay, you shouldn't be here."

He stood there looking at her through the lamp-lighted doorway. She was wearing a light blue dress trimmed in lace, with puffed sleeves that were tight on her rounded arms. Her face was smooth, with just the right amount of coloring, and her flame-colored hair was shining. She looked lovelier than he had ever seen her.

When he didn't speak, Jewell said in a low, troubled voice, "Why did you come, Clay?"

"I had to. I can't let you go through with it."

"You're just making it worse, Clay. I told you before that I had made up my mind."

"You don't know what you're doing," Chalaron told her. "Your head's so full of Wimbard's promises that you can't think straight."

"Clay, please!" Her tone held a note of desperation. "Mr. Wimbard will be here any minute. It wouldn't look right if he found you here."

Chalaron tipped his head, listening to the sound of horses hoofs coming from the direction of Chain Links. His mouth flattened with stubbornness and he stepped forward suddenly, catching Jewell before she could read his intentions. He picked her up in his arms and carried her over to his horse.

"Clay, what are you doing?" she demanded, struggling to free herself. "Put me down."

"We're going to take a ride," he said, "and give you a chance to think it over."

"Clay, you're acting like a fool."

"I'm not the only one." He swung her into the saddle and climbed on behind, holding her with one arm, leaving one free to handle the reins. He had a glimpse of a horseman coming down the trail, but he couldn't tell if it was Wimbard or not.

Sitting the saddle sideways, and no longer struggling, Jewell looked at him. "What do you think this is going to get you?"

"Time."

"It won't make any difference, Clay," she said firmly. "An hour from now or a week from now. I'll still feel the same way."

"We'll see," Chalaron murmured, and put his horse through the center of town, not caring whether they were seen or not.

GEORGE EVANS and his wife had stopped in front of the church to talk with the preacher. George looked around, smiling until he recognized Jewell and Chalaron, then his face fell and he yelled, "Hey, where you going with her?"

"Just taking a ride," Chalaron called without stopping.

Mrs. Evans began to twist her hands. "George, do something!"

George ran into the street, waving his arms. "Come back here, damn you!"

Chalaron grinned crookedly and rode on, putting his horse into a lope.

Jewell was silent until they had crossed the bridge at the end of town. Then she asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"Nowhere in particular." Chalaron had given their destination no thought, but now he turned his horse toward Lost Creek. "I might as well let you see my old outfit, the place where I grew up."

"I'm not interested."

"It's someplace to go," Chalaron said. "Somewhere we can pass the time."

There was a trace of anger in her eyes. "Can't you understand that I know what I'm doing?"

Chalaron shook his head. "This afternoon you admitted you loved me, that you were going to marry Wimbard because of your folks."

Her lips tightened. "Hasn't it occurred to you that I might have been trying to let you down easy?"

Chalaron had a bad moment, and then he smiled at her. "That's not going to work. You're just trying to make me sore."

Jewell fell silent again, staring off into the darkness.

When they rode up before the log house, Chalaron dismounted and lifted Jewell down. She stood there in the yard, looking at the place without interest.

"Three years ago," Chalaron told her, "I left here and went over to work for Wimbard. I thought I knew what I wanted, but I was mixed up, just like you. I've saved my money, though, and now I've got enough to buy some cows, to start over."

The drum of hoofs came from the darkness, somewhere off to their left. Chalaron glanced in that direction, his eyes off the girl for a moment. She was close to him, and he was not prepared for her sudden movement. He felt her hand brush his side, and when he looked around she was stepping back, his gun in her hand. "Keep away from me," she whispered. "Keep away."

Chalaron laughed and started toward her. "You wouldn't shoot me, would you, Jewell?"

"Wouldn't I?" she said through taut lips. "Just try me."

Chalaron drew up, staring at her while something cold crept into his stomach. "Yeah, I think you would, at that."

The gun didn't waver as she turned her head slightly to call out, "Hugh! Hugh!"

She waited a moment and called again, louder this time.

CHALARON watched her, seeing the hard set of her face, saying nothing.

Off in the darkness a hard-ridden horse was drawing closer.

Jewell looked at Chalaron, a chilled fury in her eyes. "You wouldn't leave well enough alone, would you? You had to go and play the hero, try to save me from myself."

Chalaron said, "I guess I played it pretty stupid, didn't I?"

"Oh, I liked you all right, thought you were nice to have around. I might have fallen in love with you if I hadn't made up my mind a long time ago what I wanted."

Chalaron showed a faint smile. "That little act you put on when we met this afternoon threw me off. If you hadn't laid it on so thick, we wouldn't be standing here now."

"How was I to know you'd try to pull

such a fool stunt?" Jewell's voice was heavy with contempt. "What did you expect to gain by bringing me out here? Didn't you know Wimbard would follow us?"

"I figured he would."

"Did you think you would let him find us together, that then I'd have to choose between the two of you?" She paused, listening to the hoofbeats come closer, and waiting for Chalaron to answer. When he didn't, she spoke again. "Maybe you thought I'd get a look at this shack of yours and start picturing the two of us living here with a bunch of kids running around the yard."

Chalaron said with quiet bitterness. "You little tramp!"

Jewell's smile was tight and wicked. "You see how much nicer it would have been if you hadn't found out what I'm really like?"

"Nicer for you," Chalaron said. "Then after you got tired of Wimbard, you and me could meet on the sly."

Chalaron turned his head as a rider came into the yard. It was Hugh Wimbard, his face hard in the moonlight. He swung down and walked over beside Jewell, his narrowed eyes pinned on Chalaron.

"So you ran off with her, kidnapped her so you could stop us from getting married?"

"I tried hard enough," Chalaron said.

"I ought to fix you good," Wimbard said, his voice thick with rage. "I ought to put a bullet in you."

"She's not worth killing anybody over, Hugh, but you'll find that out later. Go ahead and shoot."

Wimbard's hand was tight on his gun, but Chalaron saw indecision in his eyes, and after a moment of silence, the rancher said, "No, I won't kill you, Clay. That might be a little hard to explain on top of everything else that's going to happen tonight."

Jewell laid a hand on Wimbard's arm. "Let's go, Hugh. My folks will be worried."

"Yeah," Wimbard said, still watching Chalaron. "We'll go, but we'll stop at Boons Crossing. Ought to be just about in time to see my boys shove five thousand head of cows across into the lower valley."

"So, you're really going to do it up brown," Chalaron said, wondering if he should try making a grab for Wimbard's gun. "Get hitched and take over the lower valley all in one night. That's where Mathis has been, bringing in those cattle."

Wimbard smiled as if he was enjoying this. "I bought the cattle while I was down in Denver, got them dirt cheap, and Mathis has gone after them. I wasn't sure how you'd take it; that's why I was feeling you out that day at the hotel."

"They wouldn't sell," Chalaron said. "So you're going to drive them out."

"I've got to have graze for those cows that are coming."

Jewell said, "Let's go, Hugh."

"We're going," Wimbard told her. "But first I've got to put our friend Clay to sleep. Wouldn't want him to warn those old friends of his and have them waiting for us at the river. I prefer to deal with them one at a time. Keep him covered, honey, in case he tries to jump me. Turn around, Clay. I'll try not to hit you too hard."

LIKE HELL, Chalaron thought, and let the man take a step toward him. Then he moved fast, bent down and dived at Wimbard's legs. He had a fleeting glimpse of Jewell starting to bring her gun up, but he was more concerned with Wimbard. The rancher, anticipating Chalaron's move, jumped aside and brought his gun down in a chopping blow against the back of Chalaron's head.

Chalaron went down on his face, losing consciousness. . . .

He was alone when he came to, still lying in the yard with his face in the dirt. He rolled over, and groaned as pain stabbed through his head. Blood from the wound had run down onto his neck. He felt it, and then, remembering Wimbard, he cursed and tried to sit up. His head was whirling, but he got to his feet, stumbling as he made his way down to the creek in back of the house.

He slumped down on the bank and lay

there for a time before he was able to crawl to the edge of the stream. The cold water revived him some, but his head was still pounding when he went back to the house. He found his gun lying in the dirt where Jewell had evidently dropped it when she and Wimbard were leaving.

His horse, grazing at the edge of the clearing, came when Chalaron called to him. He swung up, clamping his teeth against a sudden wave of dizziness, and turned up the creek. A sense of urgency was beating at him. He didn't know how long he had lain there in the yard. It might be too late to warn Tom and his neighbors.

They wouldn't stand a chance if Wimbard's crew paid them a visit one at a time, but if he could get all the lower valley ranchers together and they could be at the river, waiting for Chain Links, it might make a difference.

Marsha and Tom Lane came to the doorway when Chalaron pounded into the yard. He rode close to the house, staying in the saddle while he told them briefly of Wimbard's plans.

"You and Marsha round up your neighbors," Chalaron told them. "I'll meet you at Boon's Crossing."

They had moved into the yard while he talked and now Tom turned and ran toward the corral. Marsha remained beside Chalaron's horse, concern in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"Clay, you're hurt."

"I'm all right. Get a move on."

"But I don't understand." She frowned at him. "You're working for Chain Links."

Chalaron shook his head. "Not any more," he said, and rode into the darkness, following Lost Creek toward the Shanamoa. He pushed his horse hard, knowing there was no time to lose, and as he drew close to the river, he could hear the rumble of hoofs.

The rough ride had set Chalaron's head to throbbing, but he fought off the dizziness and pulled up in the dense willow thickets. Sliding from his saddle, he moved through the brush until he came to its edge. From here he could look out across the river where it sloped toward the ford. He hunkered down and waited, listening to the sound of cattle on the move—five thousand head, drawing closer, bawling their protest into the darkness.

SEARCHING the surrounding terrain, Chalaron saw two riders sitting their horses on a small rise, and supposed it was Jewell and Wimbard. They were waiting to see the herd cross the river. Chalaron thought of Jewell, and in spite of what she had done to him he felt no bitterness. He knew now that he didn't love her, that he never had. He even felt a little sorry for her.

Then the herd was there, spilling down the slope toward the river while the Chain Links crew urged them on, yelling, racing their horses to cut off the strays. He thought he heard the pound of hoofs behind him, but there wasn't time to wait for Tom and his neighbors.

Chalaron let the herd reach the water and then he began to fire at the leaders, emptying his gun and jamming in fresh loads. He saw cattle go down, saw the others mill in confusion. And while he was concentrating on turning them, he had a glimpse of a rider spurring his horse down the opposite bank to cross at a point farther down. Chalaron didn't recognize him, but he had a hunch it was Mathis, moving to silence his gun.

And then Tom Lane, with Marsha beside him and followed by some of the other lower valley folks, rode out of the darkness. Chalaron saw the guns in their hands, watched them put their horses into the shallow water of the ford.

The herd had turned now, five thousand head of frightened cattle stampeding into the darkness, thundering toward the rise where the two riders sat their horses. The Chain Links crew let them go and gathered on the bank to meet the charge of the lower valley ranchers.

For a moment Chalaron stood motionless, something cold gripping his stomach as he stared at those two figures on the rise. He saw them put their horses in motion as the herd rushed toward them, and then the threat of the rider coming up the

bank toward him held Chalaron's attention.

It was Page Mathis, riding warily, his gun in his hand as he searched the brush. Chalaron let him get close and then stepped out into the moonlight, calling, "Here I am, Page."

Mathis cursed and threw a quick shot that ripped leather from Chalaron's belt. Chalaron fired twice, the second bullet taking Mathis in the chest. He fell out of the saddle, and was dead by the time Chalaron reached him.

Turning, Chalaron saw that the Chain Links crew was fleeing into the darkness, firing an occasional wild shot to hold back the lower valley men. The herd raced on, their hoofbeats fading into the night.

They found what was left of Hugh Wimbard after his horse had stumbled and the herd had passed over him. Jewell, who had escaped the stampede, was badly shaken, but unharmed. She ran to Chalaron when he rode up, but he showed her nothing but the hard set of his face.

"Reckon you can get your old job back at Joe's place," he said, figuring that would be punishment enough.

He rode back across the river with the men who had once been his neighbors, and who would be again. When Marsha came along side him, he smiled at her and said, "Lucky Johnny Hunt."

She smiled back at him. "There's nothing between Johnny and me, Clay. There never has been. I made up that story because I didn't want you to feel bad about kissing me that day."

Chalaron stared at her, knowing she was his, that he was back on the right side of the river

Back to stay.

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Joe had pursued his man for eight tortured, fearful years. Now nothing could keep him from murder

An Exciting Short Story

By ROBERT J. STEELMAN

LIKE MANY A MAN, Deputy Tom said he didn't want help from any woman—whether he needed it or not

ANITA WALLIS left the big general store with her arms full of packages of beans, coffee, and dried apples, but the gossip she had heard had taken away her appetite. The town was a hotbed of rumors and most of them had ugly undertones.

As she passed the bank a man called to her from the open door, his voice high and shrill.

"Miss Wallis—Anita! How fortunate that I happened to see you. Have you been downtown to gossip with your friends? I know how the ladies like to know all the latest scandal."

"I came to the store for groceries, Mr. Busby," Anita said stiffly. "And I'm on my way home."

"Then you haven't heard the latest bit of talk?" There was a distinct edge of malice in Ned Busby's voice. "Ah—you remember that pair of tough characters who slipped out of jail last week, nobody knows how? That is, ah—nobody admits he knows how."

"They were in for only ten days," Anita sniffed. "It seemed to me that there was a lot of fuss about very little."

"The—ah—possible method that enabled them to escape is not such a small matter. People are saying that possibly they had help. From the inside of the jail, so to speak. And everybody is also wondering if this—ah—laxity on the part of the law has anything to do with the outbreak of holdups in Lone Oak Valley. Stage was held up over near Gunder last month."

Spots of red burned in Anita's cheeks. "Why don't you say straight out that Sheriff Gerhart and Tom Drews are crooks?" she burst out. "You wouldn't dare hint it to their faces, but just because they're out of town—"

"My dear girl, I'm only repeating the gossip," Busby said smoothly. "I know the sheriff is a close friend of your father's, and I don't believe you need to be seriously concerned with his—ah—connection with this talk."

"Meaning that it's Tom, and he's the one who does all the work of the office," the girl cried. She checked herself. "I must go home and make supper. Good day, Mr. Busby."

She hurried down the street, her cheeks burning and her heels tapping angrily. When she reached her father's harness shop, she turned and went in, though he never encouraged her to come there.

"Tom, something is wrong—I don't know just what!"

HELP

By ALICE AXTELL

"Father, Tom needs help. He ought to speak up for himself. He ought to build up good will. He does almost all the work of the sheriff's office, yet because he is shy and won't speak out for himself, and Sheriff Gerhart loves the limelight, everybody blames Tom when anything goes wrong."

"I don't know that I'd say Tom was shy, exactly," her father said, dryly. "He's stubborn, bound to do things his own way."

Anita clung to her own thought. "People are so blind, so unfair. Now they're blaming him because those two men escaped last week, and because of the holdups. Sheriff Gerhart ought not hold the office; he's just a bragging old man. If Tom won't speak up for himself, someone else ought to."

Wallis flung his mallet down. "Annie," he shouted. "Has Tom spoken to you? Are you engaged?"

The girl's face flushed crimson, she could feel her cheeks burn. "No—he's said nothing—"

"Then haven't you any more sense than to be taking up his fights—throwing yourself at his head? Get back to your kitchen and your cooking, girl."

"Any woman worth her salt will stand up for her man," Anita retorted, hotly. "But I haven't said anything. I thought perhaps you would."

"You know I make it a point to tend to my own business; also, a woman worth her salt would wait to see if a man wanted her before she made a fool of herself over him."

Anita blinked back bitter tears of humiliation. "Tom does care. I'm—I'm sure he does. He's just too shy to speak out. And I think he needs help."

Wallis turned back to his work, dismissing her. "Get back to your kitchen, Annie. I tell you, Tom isn't shy—not that shy. If he needs help, he can ask for it, I'll not interfere otherwise."

THE GIRL hurried out, her cheeks burning under her humiliation, and when she reached home she put her bundles down on the kitchen table and cried. After that she felt better, but the sting of doubt and shame remained. Tom cared for her, she was almost sure he did, yet the uncertainty remained.

She set about making supper, and because Tom Drews and Sheriff Gerhart took their meals with her and her father when they were in town and she thought they might be back that evening, she made a pie; Tom loved apple pie.

She deliberately delayed preparing the meal while she watched the trail below the town. Finally, after her father had come in and muttered impatiently, she saw a slow moving cloud of dust that heralded approaching riders.

She hastily set the table for two more, but when she heard riders stop in front and went to the kitchen door to look out, she saw four men, instead of two.

Tom Drews had dismounted and was coming toward her, walking stiffly, as though he had spent a good many hours in the saddle. Anita looked past him at the two men with Sheriff Gerhart.

"Tom," she exclaimed. "Isn't that—aren't those two men the two who escaped from jail last week?"

"Yeah," Tom said briefly. "Same two. We caught up with 'em."

Anita cried impulsively, "That will stop the talk." Her smile at him was radiant with relief, but he did not respond to it.

"We'll get along to the jail," he said wearily. "Just stopped to see if we were too late for supper."

"No, of course not. I—I waited a little, and there's apple pie—"

A bellow from the sheriff interrupted her. "I smell pie," he shouted. "I ain't going to wait any longer. These fellows can watch me eat; maybe it'll learn 'em something."

Tom scowled disapprovingly, but the men were already dismounting. He said sharply, "Anita, you don't have to put up with them in your kitchen if you don't want to. I can take them on to jail."

"And miss your supper while Sheriff Gerhart enjoys himself, as usual?" Anita

retorted indignantly. "If he can neglect his duties for pleasure, you can too. Let them come in; they seem meek enough."

"They're peaceable," Tom admitted, following her inside. "I can't complain on that score."

The girl thought his tone was a little odd, and looked at him closely, but he had already turned away to wash up and she busied herself putting supper on the table.

The sheriff came in, booming and jovial, herding his prisoners along; the two men were sullen, quiet, yet the girl thought there was a sly air of amusement about them and she puzzled over it.

Her father seated himself at the table, and the sheriff followed him.

Wallis looked from the sheriff to the two prisoners and said, "Well, I see you got your men back. I'd say that was taking your job more seriously than anybody could expect, considerin' they've only got a few days to serve."

"It's the principle of the thing," the sheriff replied, importantly. He lowered his voice. "Just between us, I'm afeared we was a mite careless the last time. That made me bound to get my hands on 'em again. We must have left the key ring hangin' too close to the cell, where they could get hold of it. That won't happen no more."

Anita turned away to hide a flash of angry impatience at his boasting, and as she turned she caught the glance that was exchanged between the two prisoners. A rough amusement tinged with contempt, not quite concealed, though the bigger of the two men lowered his head to hide his face.

ANITA fumbled at the coffee pot, and all the vague fears and misgivings she had felt listening to that talk downtown, with its ugly undertones, came back.

The sheriff went on talking about himself. "Yes, sir, I've been a lawman for years, and if I do say it, I've always run the office the way it ought to be run. No job is too little and nothing's too much trouble. That's the way it should be."

Wallis seemed to accept the statement; there was no hint of sarcasm in his voice. "Then I guess you'll have this holdup problem licked pretty quick now. People are wild about it."

"Sure, sure," the sheriff said easily. "Them robbers are probably three states away by now, but if they hang around this county I'll nab 'em sooner or later. Nobody being able to give a good description of 'em makes it a mite tougher, but that won't matter."

Anita stole a quick look at the two prisoners. Both men were sober-faced, but the smaller man winked at the larger as the sheriff boasted, and then the girl was sure. Something was wrong, and Tom would be involved in it. But what could she do?

Tom was coming to the table and on impulse she said, hurriedly, "Tom, if you'll help me carry in that big box on the back porch to set things on, I'll fill up a couple of plates for your two men. There's plenty of beans and coffee, anyhow."

Tom frowned, but the girl was already through the door and he followed.

She caught hold of his arm as soon as they were out of sight of the others, pushing at him a little, her low voice urgent. "Tom, something is wrong—I don't know just what. But those men are just laughing at Sheriff Gerhart. Could they be involved in those holdups?"

Tom wasn't impressed. "Feel like laughing at him myself sometimes. Anyhow, they can't do much harm while they're locked up."

"But they aren't worried one bit about being caught again. I'd—I'd almost say they were pleased."

Oddly enough, he seemed to take this more seriously. "Pleased, huh?"

Anita said hurriedly, "Don't say I'm imagining things. I'm not—I know I'm not. Tom, if they slip out of jail again—it's you that'll be blamed, the way the sheriff builds himself up and takes all the credit. You ought to build yourself up more. You ought to make people know that it's you who does the work."

"Well, no," Tom said. "I guess not. Always figured that my work could speak for itself. If it couldn't I'd better get another job. Where was that box you wanted?"

Anita felt tears smarting in her eyes as she turned away. "Oh, Tom, will you ever speak up for yourself?"

Her cheeks burned with resentment and despair as she helped Tom carry the big wooden box inside the kitchen. Even Tom, whom she wanted to help, would not take her seriously.

SHE NODDED to Tom to go and get his supper while she filled two plates with food for the prisoners. The men watched her, the larger one with bold, appreciative eyes, and when she set the plates down she said, recklessly, "My goodness, it must have startled you to see the sheriff riding down on you. It would scare me."

The smaller of the two men laughed outright, a barking derisive sound that made the men at the table look up and turn. "Well, not exactly, huh, Phister?"

The larger man scowled at him, but spoke to the girl more diplomatically. "It was the deputy who spotted us, miss. Thank you for the food—it's mighty kind of you."

Anita exclaimed, "It was Tom who recaptured you? Oh, I knew it would be. Did he—"

Her father said sharply, "Anita, my cup is empty. Come pour me some coffee."

Anita clung stubbornly to the thought that obsessed her. "People ought to know that it's Tom—"

She saw Tom's expression. She stopped short and hurried to the stove and poured coffee with shaking hands, not even noticing that her father's cup was still half full. She stole another glance at Tom's stern face and then fled from the kitchen.

He wasn't pleased! He didn't want her to defend him, to speak up for him. He did not want her—that was what it amounted to. Her cheeks burned but she did not cry, for under her humiliation there was a hurt that went too deep for tears.

She did not go back to the kitchen, and after a while she heard the sounds of the men leaving—the back door opening and closing, the order that Sheriff Gerhart bawled at his prisoners, the sounds of horsemen riding away.

She didn't look out, nor turn when she heard a footstep behind her, thinking that it was her father.

She said wearily, "I guess you were right, Father. That's the last time I try to help any man. And if Deputy Tom Drews gets himself lynched by a mob, I—I won't even cry." Tears burned in her eyes as she spoke.

It was Tom Drews who answered her. "A man doesn't like to hide behind a woman's skirts," he defended himself hotly. "He doesn't like to have other men saying that he runs to a petticoat for help when he gets in trouble."

"Yes, indeed," Anita retorted, icily. "Just so his pride isn't hurt, nothing else matters."

"It's my job—I figure I'm man enough to handle it."

"By all means," Anita agreed. "I'm sure you can." She forced herself to speak calmly but a sudden wave of misery swept over her. She couldn't bear to stand there and quarrel with him for another minute. "I don't want to talk about it," she cried. "I don't want to listen—you can find some other place to get your meals. I'll not—I'll not bake applie pies for you any more. My opinions—my feelings—don't mean a thing to you. I don't want to see you again."

The man's broad shoulders jerked perceptibly, as though he had received a blow, then he agreed stiffly, "All right, if that's the way you want it."

He went out and in another moment she heard him ride away.

FOR THE next few days she hardly stepped outside the house, but at the end of the week, before her father left the house at noon he asked her to come to the shop that afternoon.

"I don't like to ask you to do it," he ex-

plained, frowning. "You might run into some rough customers, but I have to make a delivery and the boy who usually helps at the shop is gone."

"I'll come. I don't mind a few rough words," Anita assured him, indifferently. "Probably nothing whatever will happen."

Wallis was still fretting. "Busby, from the bank, is coming in this afternoon to look over some work I'm doing for him; otherwise, I'd just lock up the shop."

"I'd really rather meet some tough customers than Ned Busby," Anita observed. "But it doesn't matter. When do you want me to come?"

"Well, in an hour or so. Say, at half past two."

He beamed at her. "Miss Wallis—Anita—didn't expect to see you. How fortunate for me. I supposed I'd see your father; in fact, I took a few minutes off from work to do so."

"He mentioned it," Anita said crisply. "That's why he didn't lock up the shop. What can I show you?"

"He's—ah—going to do a little hand-tooling on a saddle for me," Busby explained, flustered. "I was going to look over the patterns."

Anita went over to her father's work bench. "There's a number of patterns laid out here."

Busby joined her, fingering the patterns absently. "Very nice—I hardly know

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Badger Ballad

By LIMERICK LUKE

A bachelor badger named Ben
Was digging himself a new den,
When along came a she one—
You don't have to be one
To guess who took charge of it then!

Anita nodded and at a little after two, she left the house and walked slowly down the street to her father's harness shop. The day was one of those clear, bright ones that she loved, with the sun warm, the sky cloudless, and the faint breeze cool; but today she did not linger to enjoy it.

She had learned in the last few days that if she kept busy, and kept her mind on what she was doing, that her heartache, the sting of humiliation, the treacherous longing to see Tom again, all faded into a dull ache in the background.

So she went promptly to the shop, and Wallis left at once. She had no customers until Ned Busby came.

which to choose. Have you a preference, Miss Anita?"

The girl refused to help him make up his mind. "No. Either the basket-weave or that wild rose pattern would be nice."

"Yes, certainly. Ah—do you like to ride, Miss Anita?"

Anita saw where he was heading and said hastily and untruthfully, "I don't ride well and therefore don't enjoy it very much."

He was plainly disappointed. "A pity. I'm sure I've—ah—seen you riding with Tom Drews and seeming to enjoy it very much. Perhaps if I could obtain a very gentle pony for you—"

Anita said hastily, to divert his attention, "I thought I heard shouts from the bank. What can that be for, I wonder?"

Busby went to the door. "Shouts? Are you sure? Mr. Peters must have missed me." He was agitated. "I'd better get back—I really didn't think I'd be missed for a few minutes. Tell your father I'll see him later about the pattern."

He started out the door and then stopped in a ludicrously startled position as they both heard gunfire.

Anita gasped, "What is it?"

AT THE DOOR of the bank a man appeared, backing through. He had a gun in one hand and carried a canvas bag that appeared to be heavy in the other. He had a scarf pulled up over his face; his hat was drawn low. Another, bigger man followed him.

Busby stammered, "It's a holdup!"

The first of the men ran to the hitching-rack, where two or three horses were tied, and jerked loose the reins of two of them. The bigger man deliberately sent a shot through the bank door and then another down the street that kicked up dust and sent the men gathering there diving for shelter.

Busby groaned, "They're getting away with the money—all my savings will be lost!" He ran out into the street, waving his arms. "Stop it! Stop it! You can't do this."

The escaping robbers saw him as they raced past. The gun in the bigger man's hand swung toward him. Anita screamed and covered her eyes, but then the sound of the shot sounded so loud and terrifying that she screamed again and ran out into the street.

Busby was sitting in the middle of the street, a dazed expression on his face; the bandits were passing.

The larger man swung around again as Anita ran into the street and the scarf that covered his face slipped down. She was so close she saw him plainly, heard his oath as he jerked the scarf back. She flung her hands up—could not suppress her cry.

She knew him—she had seen him too clearly to be mistaken. Both men had eaten supper in her kitchen only three or four days ago. It was Phister whose face she had seen, his smaller companion would be the other robber. But they were supposed to be in jail!

The fleeing outlaws disappeared over a low rise just beyond the town; a haze of dust drifted back. Men were running toward the bank from several directions, shouting and yelling.

Busby got up and came to the girl; still she could not move, though she was trembling. If those two men were out of jail—had Tom let them out?

Busby said anxiously, "Miss Anita, you're whiter than a ghost—did those brutes fire at you? Are you hurt?"

"I thought I recognized one of them," Anita gasped. She hardly knew what she was saying. "Oh, I'm a fool—I must be mistaken."

"Who was it?" Busby demanded.

Anita shook her head. "I must—I must have been mistaken," she faltered. "Don't say anything about it, please."

The banker, Peters, ran out into the street, gray-faced and raging. "Where's Sheriff Gerhart? Have we got any law at all in this county? Get up a posse and get after those two robbers. I'll put up a hundred dollars a head, reward money, out of my own pocket."

Someone from the gathering group of men shouted, "The sheriff's out of town. Maybe they knowed it."

Anita's gasp made Busby look at her again. Earth and sky seemed to waver; she was close to fainting. If the sheriff were gone and it had been Phister whose face she had seen, then Tom Drews would be blamed. No one would ever believe anything else.

SOMEHOW she got back to the shelter of the wooden awning over the board sidewalk in front of her father's shop, and leaned against one of the supports, thankful for something solid to cling to.

The men were shouting again. "Here's

the deputy. Here's Tom. Let's get after them cusses—they ain't got much of a start on us."

Anita turned away. She could not bear to look at Tom.

Busby came up to her. He had his coat off and was carefully holding a handkerchief over a bullet wound in his left arm, from which there was a tiny trickle of blood.

"Anita, do something for this wound of mine, will you? Ah—I'm afraid I can hardly join the posse. A pity I didn't have a gun—I could have stopped them right there."

The girl stared at him. "Why, it's just a scratch. The skin's barely broken."

Busby looked outraged. "I—ah—believe it is rather more serious than that. I can get it tended somewhere else, of course." He turned away and then with a spiteful look at her, he called to Tom Drews. "Deputy! I understood Miss Wallis to say that she could identify one of the men."

Anita clutched the support she was leaning against. Tom swung around and waited for her to speak, his brown face betraying nothing.

Anita stammered, wildly, "I must have been mistaken. I—I don't want to accuse anybody when I'm not sure."

Busby insisted, maliciously, "I'd say we were entitled to any piece of information you can give that might lead to the capture of those outlaws."

Tom said curtly, "Go ahead."

Anita looked from one to another, but the men's faces were hard and relentless; they were muttering of a lynching party. "I thought it was those two men you took to jail," she faltered. "I thought it was Phister when I saw his face. But I must have been mistaken. How could it be?"

The muttering, jostling men fell silent; the silence terrified her—it was deadly. The men were no longer regarding her; she was forgotten. They were all watching Tom. They were drawing around him, they were pressing in on him, like wolves gathering for a kill.

One man growled, "Maybe we could figure it out, huh, boys? Maybe they got a little help—maybe the law in this county has been looking the other way for quite a while."

Somebody else yelled, "Let's get a rope an' start the clean-up right here."

Anita cried out, desperately, "I tell you, I'm not sure." Even as she protested she felt despair. For she *was* sure; she had seen Phister's face too clearly to be mistaken.

A loud-voiced man at the back of the group shouted, "We'll soon find out. Let's get over to the jail—if they ain't there we'll know the law in this county is crooked."

There was a general surging in the direction of the jail, until the banker, Peters, called, "While we stand here and wrangle, those two scoundrels get away with most of the town's money! Get a posse after them!"

Tom Drews, who had been listening imperturbably, took charge. "Baldy, you take a half dozen men and start trailing them two," he said to the loud-voiced man. "I'll look into the jail. If everything's all right there, I'll catch up with you in a few miles."

Busby said nastily, "I guess you think they'll be sitting there waiting for you to let 'em in and lock them up."

Unexpectedly, Tom nodded. "They might."

The men jeered, but those who were not hastily mounting to form a posse followed him.

ANITA tried to stay behind; she knew she should not follow. Tom would be furious with her if he saw her—he wanted no petticoat help. But her anxiety drew her on.

The men crowded into the jail and were quiet for a moment. Anita hurried up to where she could peep through the door. At first she could see nothing more than the tiny, bare office; the backs of the men, all facing toward the rear, where there was a single large cell.

Then some of the men shouted, some

surged forward, some turned away, and as they moved, she could see into the cell. It was not empty—the two men were there, Phister sitting on a stool and the smaller man sprawled on a cot.

Phister looked up at the men crowding in, with a tight, cocky grin. "Look at the company we got," he jeered.

The other man lay stiff and rigid on the cot, staring up at the ceiling.

One of the men stepped up to the barred door and shook it and turned away with a disgusted grunt. "Gal made a mistake, all right, an' we come danged close to making a worse one. Let's go riding."

Most of the men agreed, their sullen suspicion relaxing, but Anita, outside the door, noticed that the man on the cot had started violently when the door was shaken and now, under his head, hidden except for a corner, she saw the edge of a gray canvas sack.

It was the same canvas sack that had been in his hands as they rode by.

She drew back out of sight, trembling, and pressed herself against the wall between the door and the corner. If the men would only go, now, while their suspicions were quieted.

Inside, Busby spoke up, his shrill voice spiteful. "Maybe Miss Wallis made a mistake and maybe she didn't. Where's a better hiding place than a jail—if you've got a deputy to unlock all the doors for you."

Tom answered Busby harshly. "I've heard enough of that kind of talk. I don't want a fight, but I won't take any more of that."

Several of the men sided with him. "That's right, Busby. Back it up with proof, or shut your mouth."

Busby squealed like a cornered rat. Then, goaded, he yelled, "Open up that cell door. I demand that those men be searched. I heard shots fired in the bank. Peters might possibly have nicked one of them."

Anita's breath seemed to stop in her throat, but she pressed her hand against her lips. She must not cry out. She heard the clang of the barred door as somebody flung himself against it; a hoarse, angry cry; then Busby's voice, rising to a shriek, "Look on the cot, there—the money sack from the bank!"

His voice was lost in the uproar that broke out. One man yelled steadily, "Get a rope—get a rope! Hang all three of the skunks right here!"

Then all at once the noise stopped; stopped as though the men had all died. But it was an explosive silence that might end any minute. Tom said softly, "Get out of here. Get going. It's my business and I'll take care of it, but I don't want to have to shoot any of you. Get out!"

There was an edge of desperation on his voice. He was hard pressed and handicapped by friendship. Anita understood it and it shook her out of her terror, her weakness.

Her pride was quite forgotten, her angry determination never to lift a finger to help Tom Drews, no matter what happened to him. He needed help now, and somehow she must contrive to bring it to him.

She ran wildly into the street, seeking from its emptiness the help that Tom had to have. The dusty street was empty, most of the horses that had been tied at the racks were gone, as the men rode out after the bank robbers, who had left town only far enough to double back.

ONE MAN was riding slowly toward her from the upper end of the street. It took her a second or two more to recognize Sheriff Gerhart. Even after she recognized him, it was a few more seconds before she began to run to him. Would he back up his deputy—or would he save himself by throwing Tom to the wolves?

He saw her running toward him and rode to meet her and she started to stammer out her explanation before he quite reached her.

"Those two prisoners you had in jail got out somehow and robbed the bank and went back to the jail. I know Tom didn't have anything to do with it, but the men

found the sack of money in the cell and they're trying to lynch Tom. They think he let them out."

"The damn young fool," the sheriff roared. "He'll go it alone once too often one of these days. He should have told me he was going to try to trap 'em." He flung himself off his horse. "I'll put a stop to it."

His unquestioning faith in his deputy brought tears to the girl's eyes. She called after him, faltering, "Don't tell Tom that I came to you—he doesn't want me helping him."

Her voice was drowned out in a new uproar from the jail. Fighting men crowded through the door, the young deputy struggling in the middle of the throng.

The sheriff's booming voice rose above the noise the men made, like a clap of thunder. "Break away, there. Break away, or I'll throw the lot of you in jail to cool off."

He emphasized the order with the butt of his gun.

The knot of fighting men broke up a little; the sheriff shoved his way between them to confront his deputy. "What's this? What's this?"

Busby shrieked, "The dirty skunk's in cahoots with these outlaws. We'll lynch 'em right here."

The sheriff roared him down. "Shut up! Tom knows his job, and he's no crook." He had gained their attention for the moment, and he continued, "Go on, boy. What is this?"

Tom looked at him a little sheepishly. "Why, I noticed when we picked them two men up, they seemed anxious to get back to jail. It started me to thinking about it, an' I finally figured it that instead of them slipping out the first time because of a little carelessness on our part, maybe they'd found some other hole, since the old jail is like a sieve anyhow. So after they got away and thought it over they wanted to get back in again. Wasn't hard to figure out a reason, with all the holdups. So instead of saying anything I snooped around till I found the loose board where they'd got out. Then I set back and waited for 'em to make their play. I guess there's no doubt but the money from the bank robbery is what we noticed in the cell, and we got the robbers where we want 'em."

"You should have told me," the sheriff said severly. "The whole thing could have gone wrong—you needed help as it was." He turned to the other men. "You woodenheads satsified? If you are, a couple of you get to the back of the jail and keep your eyes open."

Anita, still standing beside the sheriff's horse, slipped away then.

She was certain that Tom had not seen her and the sheriff had forgotten her, so the trouble ended and Tom would never know she had again interfered in his affairs.

The harness shop was empty; she went back and sat at her father's work bench and rested her head on her arms, tired and thankful.

A touch on her shoulder startled her; she looked up. Tom was standing beside her, his expression one of concern. "Say, Anita, are you all right? The sheriff said you were white as a ghost when you came after him. He told me to see that you got home."

"Oh, I asked him not to tell you," Anita cried in dismay. "I know how you feel about—petticoat help. And I'm ashamed of the things I said about Sheriff Gerhart, too. It was wonderful, the way he stood by you."

Tom put his hands on her arms. "Sounds to me like you stood by me, too. Honey, I've been a stubborn fool—any man needs that kind of petticoat help. Needs it and wants it. These last few days have been mightly long and lonely. You think I could persuade you to go back to baking pies for me again? And do it just for me, this time?"

Anita turned in his arms to rest her cheek against his sleeve, gladness in her smile.

"Why, yes, Tom, I think you could," she said. "I'm sure you could."

The face of the man was bleak and hard

Misunderstanding in the Mud

SOMETHING HAD to be done about it when Jeff was branded as a cow thief . . . in front of the girl he loved!

TROUBLE was brewing on the range, Jeff Todd knew. Rumors of missing stock had reached his ears, but he had ignored them, hoping they weren't true. When he had bought his little ranch in the foothills, heavily mortgaging his future in the hope that hard work would enable him to pay off the mortgage, he had shut his eyes to trouble, hoping it would never find him. But it was

By Robert Moore Williams

here, he knew, not only from the rumors, but from the fact that he had seen Miss Jane Cook in recent weeks, on lonely rides along the fringes of the hills. Once he had caught a glimpse of her horse on top of a high hill, outlined against the sky, as if she were searching the range below for signs of trouble. Twice he had seen her riding with bleak-faced Phil Oker and he had wondered if she had hired that hard-bitten gunman to look into the matter of missing stock.

Jane Cook owned the sprawling Bar L ranch, inheriting it from her father. She was not rich—no rancher in this section was really rich—but she was too well-to-do for a man with a mortgage as big as Jeff Todd had to tell her that she was a beautiful young woman and that he—

The thought that he liked her came out of some deep well within him. It surprised and embarrassed him. He had not known that such thoughts were in him. He hastily turned his horse down the long draw. Down there he could see a cow nuzzling a sick calf lying on the ground. He rode in that direction, to see what was wrong with the calf.

The cow had a big Bar L brand on her side. Lowing sadly, she was licking the calf and trying to nudge it to its feet. From the saddle, Jeff could see that she would never succeed.

A snake had struck the calf, and it was already dead. Clucking to his horse, Jeff rode down the draw. At the big mudhole beside the cutbank at the turn of the draw, he saw he had a problem of his own—one of his calves was stuck in the mud.

Jeff loosened the rope from his saddlehorn and prepared to rescue it. The calf was standing up to its knees in the thick muck. A little gentle pressure from a rope around its neck, and it could walk to dry land.

The rope settled around the calf's neck at the first toss. "Come on, walk out of here like you had good sense," Jeff said to the calf. He put pressure on the rope.

The calf refused to budge. Lowering its head, it set its feet deeper into the muck.

Taking a loop around the saddlehorn, Jeff clucked to his horse. He knew how to deal with reluctant calves. As the horse moved, the calf's neck stretched, it bawled, but it did not budge from the mud.

"Watch out! You'll break his neck!" the girl cried.

Jeff turned startled eyes upward. Jane Cook was sitting her horse on the cutbank above him. He fumbled for his hat.

"Why, Miss Jane, I didn't know you were within miles of me."

A SMILE came easily to her face, and made her lips very inviting, Jeff thought. He wondered what it would be like to kiss them, then, hastily put such thoughts out of his mind.

"Gosh, I don't want to break his neck I haven't got any calves to spare. But how am I going to get him out of there, if he won't walk out on his own legs?"

"You might wade in and carry him out," the girl said.

"Me wade into all that mud? Why, it's knee deep," he protested.

Her eyes twinkled at him. "I'll show you how to get him out, Jeff." She slid from the saddle, dropped the reins of her horse, and came sliding down the cutbank in a flurry of leather riding skirts and high heeled boots digging into the clay. Brass-rimmed cartridges gleamed in the belt circling her waist. The gun that hung at her hip was a .44, with worn cedar grips. It had belonged to her father, Jeff knew.

"Throw off your rope," she said.

She stooped down at the edge of the mudhole. Holding out her hand toward the calf, she began to make soft cooing sounds. "Come on out of there, that's a nice little fellow."

Behind her, Jeff snickered. "Trying to talk a calf out of a mudhole!" he said laughing.

"You're scaring him," she said. "You get out of sight."

Grinning, Jeff moved behind a clump of bushes. Watching her try to talk a balky calf out of a mudhole would be fun. He stood behind the bushes chuckling to himself.

The chuckle went away as the girl en-

gaged the attention of the calf. Slowly it pulled itself loose from the mud and moved toward her. Reaching firm ground, it licked her fingers. The girl turned triumphant eyes toward Jeff. "Here's your calf," she said. "And he's yours all right. See the brand on him?"

Jeff said, awed, "What kind of magic do you work with calves? I never saw anything like it in my life."

"I understand dumb animals and they understand me, too," she said, laughing.

"Does that go for dumb cowboys, too?"

Bawling angrily, the calf's mother came out of the bushes above the mudhole. For a second she stood there, snorting. Then she located the calf and the girl. A picture of angry defiance, she charged around the mudhole. The girl shrank back, slipped and fell. She was at the mercy of the angry charging cow.

Ranchers fear an angry bull, but far more than that, they fear an angry cow.

Jeff swung hastily into the saddle and dug his spurs into the side of his horse. The animal leaped, swung beside the cow, and got between it and the girl. The rope end in Jeff's hand came down across the cow's face, lashing there, lashing again and again and again. Dimly he saw the brand on the cow's flank, a sprawling Bar L. He kept his horse between the cow and the girl. Turning the cow down the draw, he lashed her across the flank, hard enough to make her forget about her calf. He drove her out of sight down the draw and rode back to Jane Cook, laughing.

"You may be a good hand with calves, Miss Jane, but I didn't notice you holding out your hand and making cooing noises when mama put in her appearance."

Looking bewildered, the girl was already on her feet. "Thanks, Jeff. You saved me from a nasty goring."

"You saved my calf from the mudhole, so we're even," he said, laughing. His laughter went into silence as he saw that the girl was not responding. Alarmed, he slid from the saddle. "Miss Jane, did you hurt yourself?" He tried to take her arm.

"No, no, I'm all right." She moved her arm away. "It's—it's nothing, Jeff."

Her face was set and stiff.

"But, Miss Jane, something is wrong. What is it?"

"No, Jeff, it's nothing." She turned her head aside and he saw the glint of tears in her eyes. As she moved toward her horse, he caught her arm again, not roughly but firmly, and turned her to him.

"Miss Jane, what is it? I insist on knowing, unless it's something that delicacy prevents you from talking about."

"Please, Jeff."

"I insist."

SHE TRIED to turn away. As he put pressure on her arm, she came to face him. "All right, Jeff, if you insist. You have heard rumors that I'm losing cattle."

He nodded grimly.

"The calf crop is short. Also, some of my yearlings are missing."

"Rustlers!" Indignation came up in him. This girl was running a good-sized ranch all by herself. No matter how well she did the job, a woman rancher was the natural prey of men who made their living with a wide loop and a running iron. "Why didn't you come right out and speak about this? We would have organized a rustler hunt."

"How can you organize a rustler hunt when you don't know—when you aren't certain who they are?"

"You can hunt them down and find out who they are." His voice was grim. "But there's more to it than this. You know something you haven't told me."

"Yes." She still didn't want to tell him what it was. Regret was on her face, and a touch of pain.

"What is it?"

"Please. I really don't want to say."

"I insist."

She looked reluctant. "All right. The cow—the mother of the calf in the mudhole. The calf has got your brand on it. But the calf's mother was carrying my brand."

The words were haltingly spoken. The regret had moved from her face to her voice. She hadn't wanted to say these words. He had forced her to say them.

Unrecognized until now, there popped into Jeff's mind a mental picture of the

sprawling Bar L brand he had seen on the cow's flank as he had hazed her down the draw. With this picture in his mind, his eyes went automatically to the calf, but he knew what he would see there. The calf was still muddy, but visible through the mud was the mark of the branding iron. The brand was not a month old but the mark looking back at him from the calf was his own JT. At the sight, and at the meaning of what he saw, horror flooded through him.

He gasped, "Somebody made a mistake in branding this calf. They must have got the cows mixed up." She didn't look at him, and he grasped the meaning of her averted face. "You surely don't mean—you don't think—that I misbranded this calf, do you?"

She looked at him then. Her face was set. When she spoke, she was obviously striving to keep her voice calm.

"Of course, I don't think that you deliberately misbranded the calf, Jeff. Perhaps one of my men—" Her voice trailed into silence. The one mistake her men would never make would be to brand one of her calves with a JT iron. They wouldn't have a JT iron in their possession.

The calf had turned now and was moving down the draw after its mother. The girl gestured toward it. "It's your calf, Jeff. You—you take it."

"But its mother is wearing your brand. I can't take it."

"And it wasn't a mistake," another voice spoke from the cutbank above, startling them both.

The voice was hard and flat, but there was an undertone of triumph in it as if the speaker, after waiting a long time for this chance, had suddenly found what he was looking for and was nearing some long-awaited victory. Jeff and the girl turned. The sound of triumph in the voice sent Jeff's hand toward the gun holstered at his hip. He caught the motion, knowing that it was not only premature but also that it risked the life of the girl standing beside him.

But Jeff knew too well the identity of the speaker.

SITTING his horse on the cutbank above them was Phil Oker. The man's face was bleak and hard, but under the hardness a grin of triumph was visible. His right hand was out of sight on the far side of his horse.

"So you finally caught the man who was misbranding your calves and lifting your yearlings," Oker said.

Jeff swore under his breath. He waited for the girl to answer.

"I didn't say that!" Jane Cook said, hotly.

"I sat here and listened to you say it. Are you trying to make me out a liar? There's the evidence. What more do you want?" He nodded toward the muddy calf in the draw.

Perplexed and confused, the girl hesitated. She sensed only too clearly the threat of the moment.

Jeff started to answer, but her hand came out and grasped his arm. "No, Jeff." Her voice begged him to listen.

"Well, what more evidence do you want?" Oker demanded, prodding her.

"I want to know what is happening to my yearlings," the girl spoke quickly.

Oker shrugged. The shrug clearly said that any fool ought to be able to figure that out. "He's getting them too, along with your calves."

"That's a lie!" Jeff said.

"Please, Jeff!" the girl spoke quickly, fear in her voice. "Let me handle this."

"I'm not going to let Oker make me out a cow thief, now or never."

"He's not making you out a cow thief," the girl protested.

"The evidence has already done that," Oker said. His eyes bored into the girl. "Well? It's your calf. You're the wronged party. Are you going to the sheriff and swear out a warrant?"

The girl shifted her feet in discomfort. Her shoulders seemed to sag. Then she snapped herself erect. "No!"

Oker's eyes seemed to explode with fire. He growled an oath. "Then I'll do it! I know you've been losing cattle, and now that we've found the thief, he's going to jail!" Oker's right hand came into sight,

the gun steady. The muzzle came to center on Jeff.

"Unbuckle your belt and let the gun slide," Oker said.

"Phil, what's the meaning of this?" the girl demanded.

"It means I'm taking him in myself. It means I'm going to swear out the warrant myself, if you won't."

The girl's indrawn breath was a gasping sound of fright.

"If I go along with you, will I ever get to the sheriff? Or will I get shot in the back on the way, with you claiming that you shot a cow thief as he tried to escape?" Jeff said.

Even as he spoke the words, he tried to stop his tongue. He spoke without thinking, but he had a hunch that he was hitting close to the truth. Without the girl to swear out the warrant there was no real evidence against him. If Oker was taking him to the sheriff under these circumstances, it could only mean that the gunman did not intend for his prisoner ever to reach an officer of the law.

FOR A SECOND after he spoke, Jeff thought the gunman was going to shoot him where he stood. The gun muzzle jabbed toward him. In that jabbing gun muzzle Jeff read how close to the truth his words had hit.

Oker glanced at the girl, and stopped the impulse. She would be a witness to a shooting here. He did not want any witnesses.

"Unbuckle the gunbelt," Oker repeated.

Jeff's fingers found the buckle. He let the gun slide to the ground. The look of triumph was very clear in Oker's eyes. Jeff didn't know why this gunman should show so much animosity toward him. He hardly knew the man, except by reputation. Why should Oker try to tag the brand of a cattle thief on Jeff?

Suddenly the bellow of a cow sounded up the draw. Still bawling, she came around the mudhole. She snorted at the humans, eying them, but she made no move toward them. The calf heard her. It turned and ran on wobbly legs toward her.

She nuzzled and licked it, snorted as she identified it as her own. The brand on the cow was very clear—two letters, joined together—JT.

The meaning was obvious. The rule on which all branding was based said that a cow knew her own calf.

"That's your cow!" Jane Cook gasped. "Then this *is* your calf. It's branded right after all." A sudden smile came to her face, but then she frowned. "But that other cow, the one that charged me—"

"I know," Jeff spoke quickly. "One of your cows was nuzzling a dead calf that a snake had bit. I didn't remember it until now. That was the cow that charged you. She had lost her calf and was trying to adopt this one."

"You're crazy!" Oker shouted. "That never happens. A cow won't have anything to do with any calf but her own."

"A cow that has just lost her own calf will," Jeff answered.

"Jeff, I'm sorry I doubted you." Jane Cook spoke impulsively. Her face was contrite, but the glow in her eyes said she was very glad that she had got to the bottom of this and that he was not guilty of misbranding one of her calves. Impulsively she moved toward him. Before the startled Jeff Todd knew what was happening, she had kissed him.

"That's to say I'm sorry," she said laughing.

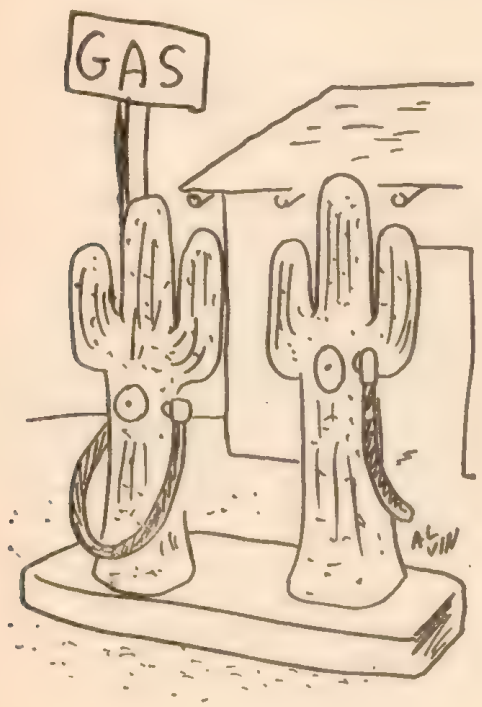
"Miss Jane!" Jeff gasped. Then the gasp became a shout. With one arm he swept her to his side and down to the ground. He dropped to the ground himself, snatching for the gun he had been forced to drop.

Phil Oker, his face a mask of contorted rage, was spurring his horse down the cutbank, intending to ride Jeff down. Possibly he was intending to ride the girl down too. The instant before he had thought that Jeff Todd was safely branded as a cow thief. The next moment he had seen the only person who could really make such a charge stick, kiss Jeff. The fury that exploded in him at the twin frustration extended from Jeff to the girl.

As Jeff hit the ground, a bullet tore through the air where he had been stand-

ing. Gun thunder snarled. Above him, coming down the cutbank, the horse was all sprawling legs and distended nostrils. As Oker sank the spurs deep into the horse's flank, the animal lunged and leaped.

JEFF GOT the gun in his hands and fired a shot. Iron-shod hoofs tore the ground toward him. He rolled to one side. Again the gun roared above him. Hot lead dug into the dirt. He snapped another shot upward. The horse snorted, veered, passed beside him. He caught a glimpse of



Phil Oker yanking savagely at the reins, and horse and rider went past him.

Oker turned the horse. Bending low on the other side of the animal, riding like an Indian, Oker came back in full charge.

"Jane! Where are you?" Jeff shouted.

He hardly got the words out of his mouth before the horse was on him again.

"You damned cow thief!" Oker screamed.

Jeff, on his feet now, dodged sideways. The shoulder of the horse hit him, sending him sprawling, and the gun was knocked from his hand. The horse went past him and again Oker tried to turn. The animal slipped and fell, heavily. In order to escape being trapped under the falling horse, Oker had to leap from the saddle.

He hit sprawling, and rolled.

As Oker came to his feet, Jeff hit him a savage blow that had all his wiry strength behind it. The jolt of the fist against Oker's jaw rocked his head backward. He had retained his gun during his fall from the horse. He tried to bring it up.

Catching the weapon in his right hand, Jeff shoved the gun away from him. His left fist crashed against Oker's jaw, and the man went down. His eyes seemed to be trying to bulge from his head. He dropped the gun. Jeff snatched it up. For a moment, the fury was so great in him that he almost shot the man. He checked the fury. Oker was out of the fight now.

But something more important than Oker was not accounted for—Jane. Jeff had not seen her since he had thrust her to the ground. That pawing, snorting, charging horse might have trampled her. Jeff turned, hunting for her.

She was coming toward him, covered with mud.

"I fell in the mudhole too," she said. Still wiping mud from her face, she had her gun in her hand. She was looking for battle. "Where is he?"

"He's taken care of. Jane, I pushed you in the mud!" Jeff was utterly appalled. "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right, Jeff. I don't mind in the least. The mudhole was actually the only place that was safe for me—Jeff!" Looking past Jeff, she screamed and tried to bring up the gun.

At the same instant, Jeff felt arms close around his legs. He was lifted from behind. Oker had been dazed but he had not been knocked out.

As his arms went around Jeff's legs, Jeff struck downward at the man's head with the barrel of the pistol.

The gun barrel smashed across Oker's skull. He grunted.

Jeff hit the ground and came to his feet. Oker lay without moving. The blow with

the gun barrel had really knocked him out.

"Well, that's finally done," Jeff panted. He turned to the girl. "But would you mind telling me what this is all about? Why would this joker try so hard to pin the brand of a cow thief on me, and why would he try to kill me?"

"Because *he* is the cow thief," the girl answered. "You may have seen me riding the range a lot recently. I was looking for evidence. I found it, and Phil Oker knew it. He was trying to pass the blame on to you and he thought he found a chance in the cow that claimed the wrong calf."

"I see," Jeff said. "This makes sense. If he could have branded me as a cow thief, he might have gone free himself."

"That's what he thought," the girl answered. "He also thought he loved me. When I kissed you, I guess that made him sort of crazy for a while."

Jeff thought about that kiss. He could see where it would do something to a man. He began to grin. "Say, that kiss did something to me too," he said. He moved toward the girl.

"Wait until I get the mud off my face," she said, smiling back at him.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Water hemlock, growing along streams and in other wet places at altitudes from 3,000 to 9,000 feet in many parts of the West, is probably the most poisonous plant in the whole U.S. What is another common name for it?

2. Is the average number of coyote pups in a litter one to three, five to seven or eight to ten?

3. The King Merritt Memorial Cancer Foundation was organized recently at Cheyenne, Wyo. For what was King Merritt well known throughout the West before his recent death?

4. Before Judge Roy Bean renamed it for the famous actress, Lily Langtry—Langtry, Texas bore the name of an ugly sun spider or desert scorpion commonly called what?

5. Suppose you were traveling on U.S. Highway 2 between Wolf Point and Chinook and took a side trip to visit the Fossil Fields near Ft. Peck Reservoir. What state would you be in?

6. What was the only domesticated fowl the Pueblo Indians had before the coming of the Spanish Conquistadores?

7. Certain historic buildings were originally the Mission of San Antonio de Padua and later called the Mission of San Antonio de Valero. As a shrine of Texas liberty, what are they called today?

8. Tom O'Folliard, Hendry Brown and Charlie Bowdre were pals of what famous New Mexico outlaw?

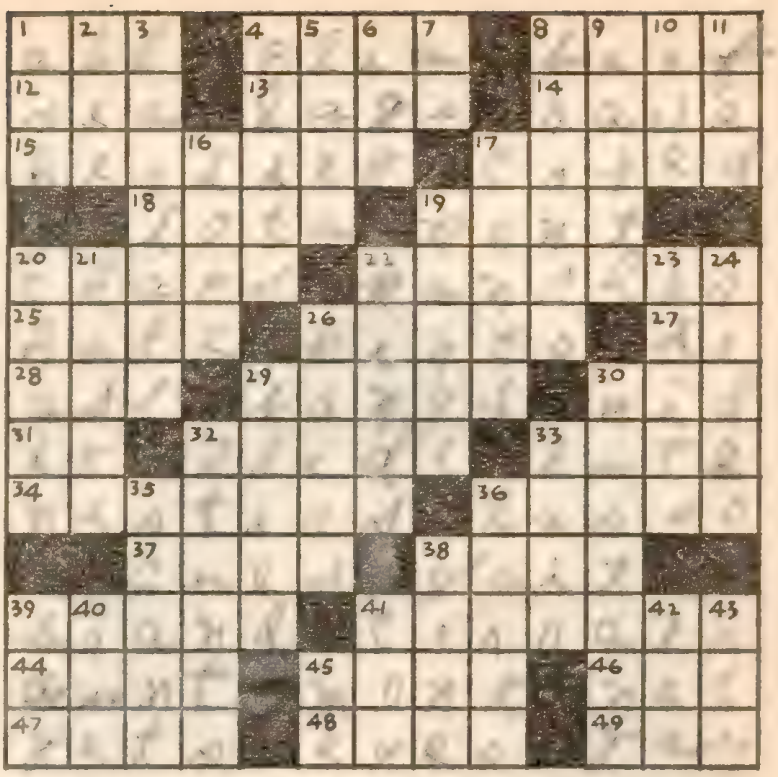
9. The present state capital of Arizona is Phoenix. Was its first capital Prescott, Tucson or Tombstone?

10. Two cow-country towns hard hit by tornadoes last summer were Waco and San Angelo—in what state?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 85. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Everyone
4 Juniping insect
8 Western product
12 Ocean
13 Loiters
14 To talk wildly
15 Cattle tending
17 Removed the center
18 Jot
19 To lease
20 Cowboy garment
22 Western cattle owner
25 To detest
26 Calico horse
27 To perform
28 Donkey
29 Slams
30 In the middle
31 The thing
32 To slip
33 Stringed instrument
34 Western squatters
36 Lariat
37 Billiard sticks
38 Manner of walking
39 Owner's mark on cattle
41 Cattle enclosures
44 Mother's sister
45 Friar
46 Twine fabric
47 Obtains
48 Female sheep
49 Merry

DOWN

1 Cigar residue
2 Civil War general
3 Cowboy ropes
4 Darts along
5 Miss Turner, actress
6 Hen fruit
7 Because
8 Half-wild horse
9 This planet
10 First woman
11 Gave food to
16 To drug (slang)
17 Pennies
19 Cattle land
20 Series of links
21 Speed
22 Fruit skins
23 Prepares for publication
24 Wild West show
26 Couples
29 To shed blood
30 Half-wild horse
32 Daring feats (colloq.)
33 Den
35 Meager
36 Merry adventures
38 Vanished
39 Sack
40 To regret
41 Calf's mother
42 Meadow
43 Pigpen
45 Myself

B	R	A	H	M	A	S	■	R	E	I	N	S
E	A	S	I	E	S	T	■	E	X	T	O	L
E	N	S	■	S	K	Y	■	M	I	S	T	Y
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Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

a tragic love story of the Old West

Across the Deep Water

By

Zoe A. Tilghman

ANNICE PAUL wasn't a Chickasaw princess, because the Indians had no king, hereditary royal family, or rank. Generations of white intermarriage had reduced her Indian blood, which showed only in the creamy tan of her skin, her glossy black hair and dark eyes. And Paul was not her sur-

name on the old Chickasaw tribal rolls.

Annice had a brief courtship that ended when her lover went away to war, but for a time it created a stir in the little corner of the world then known as the Chickasaw Nation. It caused the Chickasaw council to send guards riding posthaste to protect the life of Reverend John H. Carr.

In the 1830's the Chickasaws had moved from their old home in Mississippi to lands north of the Red River in the Indian Territory. By 1856 they were prosperous. Very few full-bloods remained; many of the mixed bloods, more white than red, had slaves and lived in Southern-plantation style. Steamboats on the Red River carried away their cotton and brought back many luxuries. Their rich country afforded lavish living.

They built a number of boarding schools for boys and girls and contracted with missionary boards of various churches to operate these schools.

Rev. John H. Carr, a methodist minister, was superintendent of Bloomfield Academy. His wife, a graduate of Mount Holyoke, and several teachers were his able assistants. Besides learning the Three R's, the girls shared the housework. The students' afternoons were devoted to social accomplishments.

The little old lady who in 1918 waited for her grandson to return from war, said pathetically: "I dreamed of riding into a deep river when Alec went away. It was that way with the other Alec, too. He never came back. . . ."

The story of Rev. Mr. Carr gives only a glimpse of Annice Paul's story. She was fourteen years old when Alec Greene came to the Chickasaw Nation.

His father was a cousin of William Walker, and young Alec wanted to go with Walker, filibustering in Nicaragua. But Alec figured in a duel and his father shipped him off to the West, instead.

As he stepped off the steamboat at Doaksville, on the Red River, Annice Paul chanced to be riding by. Her handsome Kentucky mare, and then its rider, caught Alec's eyes. As if she felt his gaze, her own met his with a shy, soft smile. He stood staring after her as she galloped off, supple and graceful.

Annice was not "out" in society, for her people kept the Southern tradition—but Alec managed to meet her. Shy at first, she was soon filled with the wonder of first love. It wasn't Alec's first, but it turned out to be his greatest.

IF HER parents wondered at her frequent visits to her old Negro nurse, they considered it unimportant. In spite of some conventions, girls there had considerable freedom. To visit friends, they could ride where they pleased. The Pauls had already planned to send Annice to Bloomfield at the opening of school.

It was her uncle, Pitchford Paul, who one day saw Alec meet Annice on her ride. That night, in the bar of the tavern, Pitch forbade Alec to see or speak to her again.

"Sir, I'm a gentleman," Alec replied, "and there's nothing wrong with my riding on a public road, or speaking to a young lady."

Uncle Pitch threw a glass of whisky in Alec's face. In the fight that followed, Pitch Paul's gun went off. The landlord, with the aid of a husky steamboat mate, pulled the combatants apart. Both were decidedly unsteady on their feet. Alec Greene had a swelling black eye, not from the fist of Uncle Pitch, but because he had fallen against a heavy oak chair. The shot had bored harmlessly through the door.

Mr. Folsom, who later became chief of the Chickasaws, led them both aside with a stern reprimand.

"You don't want to bring scandal on a young lady's name," he told them. "Both of you go home, and let's have no more of this."

Annice was tenderly distressed over Alec's eye. They had one meeting before she was whisked off to Bloomfield. Even then, her parents knew nothing of her love for Alec. Alec had cautioned her to secrecy.

"When I hear from my father, everything will be cleared up," he told her. "Till then, nobody must know."

But the next steamboat, and the next, brought him no word. His longing for

Annice drove him to the academy, where he presented himself as a caller for Miss Paul.

Mr. Carr, the superintendent, hesitated. This handsome man had a reckless gleam in his eye and an air of arrogance. Also, gentlemen visitors for the young ladies were frowned upon.

"Have you permission from Miss Paul's parents to visit her?" Mr. Carr asked.

"No, but I'm sure it will be all right. Ask Miss Paul about it," Alec replied.

"It is against the rules of the institution," said Mr. Carr. "Unless you can bring written permission, I am obliged to refuse you."

Alec argued with some bluster, but at length the firmness of the minister prevailed.

Again and again Alec besought Mr. Carr to let him see Annice. Evidently he feared the story of his duel at home would discredit him; otherwise he would have gone frankly to her parents. Once he told Mr. Carr that he had their permission to see Annice, but he could not produce the required paper, so he was turned back again.

Alec induced a woman who lived not far away, to give a "candy stew"—taffy pulling—and invite the Bloomfield girls, but only a few of the youngest came. Then he tried to bribe a teacher to help Annice run away with him.

That brought the explosion. The teacher told Mr. Carr, and Mr. Carr informed her parents. They came and took her home for two weeks.

Annice was strangely silent when she returned to school. Before, she had been gay and laughing. She confided in none of the other girls, who of course were wildly curious.

ALEC finally received a letter at the Doaksville post office, but it was not from his father. He read it and rode furiously for Bloomfield. To Mr. Carr he cried, "I must see Annice. She must tell me with her own lips that she meant what she wrote in this letter!"

Annice, hiding in the kitchen, sobbed her answer to Mr. Carr. Yes, she had written the letter. She couldn't face Alec. Her father had said—Fresh sobs ended the sentence.

Mr. Carr went slowly back to Alec. Fury flamed in the young man's eyes as he heard the message.

"They made her write it!" he cried. He flung himself into the saddle and galloped away.

Back at Doaksville he drank wildly, raving threats.

"I'll get her yet!" he vowed. "I'll pay off those people!"

His violence alarmed the Chickasaws who had daughters at the school, and the council hastily assembled. "He is a wild and reckless man. If he goes there—" said Mr. Folsom. "But he has broken no law. We cannot arrest him yet."

"But he may kill Mr. Carr!"

Quickly they voted to send two men to the academy as guards for the superintendent. They rode all night, reaching Bloomfield at dawn.

The minister smiled. "I do not need guards," he said. "I have a greater Protector. But light down, eat and sleep."

One precaution he did take, as much for his "family" as for himself. That night he locked the front door of the building, the only time this was done during his regime.

But Annice slipped out to meet her lover, as a ragged moon dropped slowly down the west.

"I'll love you always," Alec promised her, "and some day I'll come back for you. William Walker is president of Nicaragua now, and I'm going to join him. I'll be one of his generals, and have a beautiful palace. Then I'll come for you. Do you love me?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Oh, Alec, I'd go anywhere with you. I'll wait for you. . . ."

Annice did wait, for three years. By that time she had finished at Bloomfield and was sent to a seminary in Kentucky. There a strange, gray little man one day sought her out.

"I am Dr. William Walker, of Nicaragua," he told the lady principal. "I have an important message—from a dying man—for Miss Paul."

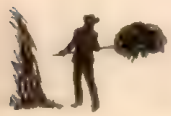
The principal sent for Annice, and left the two alone in the parlor. Dr. Walker told her of Alec's death and of his last message of love for her.

That night Annice dreamed the dream that she had had when her lover first went away.

In another year, Walker died before a firing squad in Central America. Then the Civil War was upon the land. As the South failed, the Pauls' slaves were lost, and their properties desolated.

A young soldier who had gone through the war came wooing her, and Annice married him. She had children, and the marriage was a happy one. But she named her second boy Alec; and his son—her grandson—Alec was her favorite. It was for him she dreamed again of the deep water, as when the other Alec went away.

Annice saw many doughboys come home, but Alec was not with them. In a few months she too had crossed the deep water.



The Wife in His Life

by

S. Omar Barker

For a cowboy to better his lot in life,
He ought to marry a cowgal wife.
She'll want a home, without a doubt,
That's better than just plain campin' out.
She'll want a house that is good enough
To prove her husband has got the stuff
To keep a wife—and after a while—
A batch of kids—in decent style.

He may protest to his spendin' bride
That hers is a sample of sinful pride,
But as she buys stuff he meant not to,
He'll earn more dough—because he's got to!
He'll work some harder and save his pay,
Just plain do better in every way,
Till, once she's pushed him up the ladder,
He'll purt' near sure be glad he had her
To crowd him some toward makin' good—
Because she knew all the time he *could!*

Branded in BLACK

by TALMAGE POWELL

THE FOOL HEIFER had slipped into the mud of the slough and stood sunken almost to her swollen abdomen. She bawled in patient terror as she waited to die.

Astride a steeldust mare, Brad Ledbetter shook his lariat loose and threw a loop over the cow's head. Her lowing had guided him here from a fence-mending job in the south meadow. As the loop settled, the steeldust, needing no instructions, put her weight against the rope. Instead of pulling free, the heifer bawled anew, laying back against the lariat.

Cussing the contrariness of all cows, Brad swung from the saddle, a tall man in his late twenties. He was heavy through

TO SAVE LAURA'S LIFE—and maybe his own—Brad was forced to reveal a past that might cancel out his future

the shoulders and his square-hewn face, creased and burned walnut by wind and sun, carried within it some of the bleakness of his winters; this was relieved in a measure by the crinkles at the corners of his gray eyes and the upturned corners of a wide-lipped, humorous mouth.

He sat down, removed his runover boots, and rolled his faded jeans above the knees.

"And you with first-born calf too," he chided the heifer as he moved into the mud behind her.

She rolled her eyes and tried to turn her head to follow this new source of fear. Brad reflected that he was going to have to fill the slough. Most of the time the slough was a dried-up paving as hard as adobe brick; but every few years torrential rains turned it into what it was now, treacherous glue. Brad had paid down on the place less than six months ago; he'd found it no bargain, but reckoned that a man had to take troubles as they came, one at a time. He could visualize what might be done with a lot of hard work on the B Bar L, and he was willing to plod toward making the vision a reality.

The heifer made an effort to squirm away as he grasped her tail. With a firm grip, he gave the tail a twist, at the same moment opening his throat in a wild shout.

The steeldust obeyed the command, lunging forward. Outraged at the attack on her rear, the heifer forgot to fight the lariat. Her hoofs sucked free; she stumbled to hardpan, and Brad moved out behind her. He removed the lariat, swiped it across her hindquarters, and watched her bound away, sagging belly swaying in time to her irate movements.

Brad grinned after the heifer, wiped his face with his bandanna, and walked the few yards to the willow-shaded creek, where he washed his feet.

He came out of the brush with his boots on and was remounting the steeldust when a hallo caught his ears. He raised his eyes to the west and saw a horseman limned against the soaring emptiness of the sky. He waited, and as the figure on horseback came closer it resolved into a girl.

BRAD RODE forward to meet her with a smile. Laura Simmons was tall, slender, moved with the grace of a willow whip, and possessed a darkly vivid beauty. She was range-bred, the daughter of the owner of the Hammer. She was in love with Brad Ledbetter, frankly, honestly. She didn't care who knew that she came to his place to clean his weathered cabin and point out the advantages of marriage.

Brad wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything; and that included land and cattle and respectability. But he hadn't mentioned marriage to her for two reasons. The B Bar L was not yet a fit place for a woman, especially a woman acustomed to the size, wealth, and power of the Hammer. That was the minor reason. The main reason was the fact that she knew nothing about Brad and the thought of telling her drove a hard, quick pang of fear through him.

She was wearing flannel shirt and jeans, her black hair knotted at the nape of her slender neck by a red kerchief.

"I heard you shout and a cow bawling over this way," she said. "I was looking for you."

"Anything wrong?"

"A stranger—a girl with honey-blonde hair and baby-blue eyes—over at the house says she wants to see you right away," Laura said with too much lightness in her voice. "She said to tell you Elena is here—and she chattered in a quite familiar way about you, Brad."

Her violet eyes, contrasting with her black hair and sun-tanned skin, studied him. He felt the distance growing between them, and the fear of it overrode the shock of Elena Lynn finding him.

Laura came from fiercely proud stock and it was reflected in her manner and tone, "You've never told us a thing about yourself, Brad—where you came from, who you are, really. I've paid no attention to the talk about you a man of mystery naturally arouses, feeling that you would tell me in good time anything necessary for me to know. Maybe that time has come now. Are you hiding something?"

He had wanted to pick the time and place to tell her; now he realized he'd let opportunities slip away. This was an awkward time, but he must tell her now. If he sent her away without telling her, the wound of it might be a long time in healing.

A line of whiteness grew about his mouth. "Have you ever heard of the Pickenses?"

"Who hasn't? But surely you never rode with . . ."

"They're my people. Ed Pickens my brother, Cos Pickens my father. Tolly, my oldest brother, was killed in a gunfight when I was eighteen years old. I've never been the same since, Laura. I knew their way was wrong, that I could never walk in their footsteps. When I was old enough, I drifted from home and went to work. Three times before the Pickens name has caused me to have to move on. This time I dropped it. Ledbetter is my middle name, my mother's maiden name."

Laura reined in her mount a little closer. "Does the law want you for anything?"

"No."

"Then you could have told me all this before. It would have made no difference."

Looking at her clear face, he thought: I don't deserve you. Again the old uncertainty swept across his mind. Laura might accept him—but how about the others, the folks in town, her father? He'd tried before and failed to shake the Pickens stigma. Was there any likelihood he would succeed this time?

"And who is the girl, Brad?"

"A girl I knew once. She married Jeffers, who rides with my father."

Jeffers, the worst cutthroat in a cutthroat crew. The James boys had some justification in their feud with the railroad; the Younger brothers and Daltons were known for their loyalty to each other. The Pickenses had nothing on the ledger except a red record of cruelty, brutality, outlawry.

"You want to ride to the house alone?" Laura asked.

"I think it would be best."

She turned her horse. He watched her ride out of sight over the ridge before he set spurs to the steeldust.

THE HOUSE was a log and adobe cabin set in a little cove formed by nature above the creek. The roll of the land protected the house against the northers of winter and a patriarch cottonwood gave shade in summer.

With a passing glance at the lathered, dust-caked sorrel cropping grass above the house, Brad went inside. Here was cool shelter, and the lingering smell of fresh-hewn wood he'd used to repair the cabin and add a third room. He'd wanted a parlor, kitchen, and bedroom, all separate, and maybe some time in the future another room or two with small bunks.

Now he stepped into the front room, near the stone fireplace, and looked at the blonde girl eating beans and jerky in the kitchen.

She stood up, letting a slow smile take birth on her full red lips. Trail dust failed to hide her sinuous beauty, and the air of the cabin had changed. Elena had brought something new into it.

She came forward, put her hand to his cheek, her head to one side. She looked like a gamin doll, with her honey hair and blue eyes.

"Hello, Brad. You don't act very glad to see me."

He moved away. The print of her fingers still lay on his cheek. "I heard you married Jeffers."

She laughed. "You rode off and left me."

"That was a good long time ago." Brad walked on through the house. On the back porch he dippered water into a tin basin, splashed it over his face with his hands, and reached for a flour-sack towel. "Where are the others?"

"How should I know?"

He hung up the towel, studying her face. She grinned at him. He couldn't guess what she was thinking, but he felt a chill inside. Where Elena rode, trouble rode not far behind. He'd seen men fight over her like beasts. He still carried a ridge of scar tissue under his jaw from the fight.

"How'd you find me?"

"We've known where you were for three months. Ed passed through San Miguel one day. He sees a man loading supplies on an old, spraddle-wheeled wagon. Who's that, he asks a bystander, and the fellow says, 'Name of Ledbetter,' and Ed says, 'Ledbetter?' and rides on."

Brad went into the kitchen, ladled beans into a dish, added jerky, broke a chunk from a pone of bread, and sat down to eat. Elena sat across the table from him. She watched him eat, smiling every time their eyes met.

"I still like you," she said, directly.

"And I like you—as long as we keep the distance of the table between us."

She pouted; then laughed. "Don't prod me, Brad. I'm one of those women who hankers after anything she can't have."

He got up and poured himself a cup of scalding coffee, which Elena had heated and left on the sheetiron stove. "Quit talking around the point," he said. "What brought you here?"

"Maybe just didn't have anyplace to go."

"What about Jeffers?"

ELENA curled her arms on the table, rested her face against them for a moment before looking up again. Her eyes and face suddenly looked older—no less beautiful, but tired. "They bit off more than they could chew, Brad. The lot of them. They tried to rob a bank in Three Corners. Jeffers shot the cashier, and when they stepped outside, the town was a hornet's nest. Your brother Ed got pretty bad shot up. Clem Hathaway killed the man that did it."

She had omitted mention of old Cos.

Brad set his coffee mug down. "And Pa?"

She licked her lips. "He was killed, Brad. I guess the townspeople of Three Corners put him in their boothill."

He rested his hands on the window sill after he turned from her, and let his head drop. He'd known it was bound to happen somewhere, some time. He was glad his ma didn't have to live through this day.

He raised his head, saw the sun sinking redly, and a fleeting moment passed during which he felt strange and alien to this earth.

"Brad," Elena said behind him, "I'm sorry. It'll be rough when word filters down here about the robbery—folks knowing you're a Pickens, I mean."

"Nobody knows."

"How about that girl, the one who was here?"

"It won't make any difference to her. She'll not tell until I'm ready."

"You trust her a lot."

"I'd bet my life on her."

"Not much like me, huh, Brad?" Elena laughed. "Or maybe a lot like me. I'd fight the devil for the man I loved." She stood up. "I just wanted to be sure, Brad. About your being safe, I mean—and, well, able to go on living your kind of life no matter what your pa and Ed have done."

He eyed her narrowly. She wrinkled her nose at him. "Maybe I'm just tired. Let me sleep in the barn tonight and help me find some kind of work in town tomorrow—you must know people here. Your word would mean something. I'll make good, Brad. I won't bring shame on you so long as I know you're safe and respectable here."

"So far, I am." On sudden impulse he said, "All right, Elena, I'll see if I can help. You take the house. I'll bunk in the barn tonight."

"Thanks, Brad. Now scoot to one side and let me at those dishes."

As he moved from the kitchen, he turned and looked at her stacking dishes in the tin pan. She looked like a kid playing house. Soft, trusting, innocent. That's the way she looked.

Jeffers's woman.

SAFFRON lamplight etched the lace curtains against the windows of the Hammer ranch house as Brad dismounted and stepped on the porch.

His nostrils caught the odor of rank pipe tobacco, and a shadow down the porch spoke, "Evening, Brad."

"Hello, Mr. Simmons. Laura around?"

"And where else would she be?" Mike Simmons asked. He shifted his chair; a tinge of lamplight touched his face. He was a gnarled, weathered old man with a square face and iron-gray hair. He had come here forty years ago and built the Hammer with nothing but a good horse and determination. Some said his loop had been long and his branding iron quick in those early days. But times had been different then, and so had practices.

Now he was old, and rheumatism kept him off his horse, and a quick pain bored through his heart sometimes. Brad knew the old man's major thought nowadays was of Laura and her heritage, the Hammer. It would take a man with a lot of assets to handle the two properly, and so far old man Simmons had given no indication that he felt Brad to be such a man.

Brad was always aware of this feeling when he was in Simmons's presence. It was almost as if Simmons suspected his inner secret, his uncertainty and hesitation.

Mike Simmons spoke of the recent rains, and then Laura came to the porch.

"I thought I heard familiar voices out here," she said. "How is the heifer, Brad?"

"All right, I guess."

Mike Simmons cleared his throat in the silence that descended. He knocked his pipe out and got painfully to his feet. An offer to help him would have been considered an insult.

"Need to go over some figures in my tally books," he excused himself. "Don't be too long, Laura."

"All right, Pa."

The old man shuffled inside. Laura sat down beside Brad on the porch swing. He thought of Cos, a renegade, blasted by the bullets of decent people, and he felt the quiet security of the Hammer about him and wondered if he would ever feel at home in a world like this.

Laura touched his hand. "What's troubling you, Brad?"

"Elena told me my father was killed, my brother hurt not long ago."

Jeffers looked at Brad, a cold purpose in his eyes

"Oh, Brad! I'm sorry!"

"Nothing could have stopped it. It's the end of the Pickens gang. Maybe in a few years folks will think of the old man less harshly. He just had a devil inside of him that wouldn't let him be satisfied." He worried his hat in his hands. "It may be that I'll have to find Ed, my brother, and give him what help I can. Elena says he hit a long trail with Jeffers and a man named Clem Hathaway. Meantime—well, the girl needs help too, Laura."

Again he felt her withdrawal. She said, "You were in love with her once, weren't you?"

"I thought I was," he said honestly.

"Are you now?"

"No."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Put in a word for her if you hear of work in town. Give her some of your old clothes, maybe. She's a pretty destitute little animal."

"With claws."

Despite the weight on his spirit, Brad grinned. "I'll see that her claws stay away from me."

"They'd better."

Brad stood up. Laura stood with him. He gripped her shoulders, brushed her lips with his. It was like tasting sweet wine. He held her close.

"Brad, let's tell Pa who you really are. Now. Right now. Then let's get a license and stand up before a marrying parson."

LAURA was voicing his wish, his deepest hope. He was lost in the thought of her in the cabin on the B Bar L, rising with him each morning with her hair loose about her shoulders, her voice ringing out to him as he came each evening. Then his mind did an about-face, toward reality. "Old Mike would run me off the Hammer if he knew right now."

"I'd go with you."

"I wouldn't want to hurt you like that."

"Then what are you going to do, Brad? You've got to tell folks some time, face up to it."

"I know," he said quietly. "But not right now. Give San Miguel a chance to quit talking about the news that'll hit presently of a bank robbery and shooting in Three Corners. And give me a chance to find out about Ed."

"All right, Brad. But it won't keep me from being afraid."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. But I have the feeling something terrible is about to happen to us."

"It's just because you've never acted in secret before. And I'll not ask you to again."

She followed him to the edge of the porch. "I'll come over tomorrow and see if I can make acquaintance with your little wild animal. But if I end up clawing her eyes out, don't say I didn't warn you. . . ."

When he got back to his own cabin, it was dark. He unsaddled the steeldust at the pole corral, carried saddle and saddle carbine into the barn. The gun should go on its pegs over the fireplace, but it would rest well enough in its scabbard tonight. Elena might misunderstand if he entered the cabin.

He climbed the ladder into the loft, squirreled his way over the hay, slid off his boots, and lay down, hands behind his head. He thought of Ed and the old man and he knew how it was going to be around here, folks using the name Pickens behind his back like a curse and glancing away when he walked down the street. He slept with unpleasant dreams.

The shrill, hoarse crowing of a bantam rooster awakened Brad. He stirred, sat up, pulled on his boots, scratched his head and rubbed sleep from his eyes. On the way over to the house he rolled a cigarette and scraped a match on the thigh of his pants to light it.

A trickle of smoke curled from the chimney and he smelled sidemeat frying as he stepped into the house. It was still early, with the sun shaking loose its skirts of mist in the east, but Elena was already up.

"Good morning, Brad," she said from the kitchen doorway.

Before he could answer, he heard a

wracking groan in the bedroom. He stared at Elena, and then turned quickly. Jeffers stood in the bedroom doorway, a lean, gaunt man with sunken, stubbled cheeks and eyes of flint in cavernous sockets.

"Hello, Brad," Jeffers said. "Long time no see." His voice was thin, unpleasant. He was wearing a brace of bone-handled sixguns, palms resting on them.

Brad crossed a bitter glance from Jeffers to Elena and back again. Then he moved to the bedroom doorway and Jeffers stood aside for him to enter.

IN FEVER, Ed Pickens had torn aside the patchwork quilt and was tossing on the feather ticking of the huge, hand-hewn bed. Brad remembered his brother as a young, yellow-haired giant, but Ed was wasted now, cheeks gray and flat, covered with dirty blond stubble, his blue eyes half mad. Brad looked at the wide, bony shoulders, stripped bare, a bloody bandage over the right shoulder coming down to a point above the heart. He passed his palm over Ed's ridged brow to wipe away the heavy drops of icy sweat.

He turned, brushed past Jeffers, and stood before Elena. He lifted his hand as if he would hit her, then let it drop. "So it was a job and help you wanted."

"Leave her alone," Jeffers said quietly.

Brad gave him a glance over his shoulder. Jeffers's thin, bony face showed nothing. Brad guessed the man could draw and pull trigger without any change taking place on his face.

"Why be sore, Brad?" Elena invited. "We brought Ed, didn't we?"

"What's left of him."

She gave him a sultry threat with her blue eyes. "Why don't you just relax and remember we're your friends?"

"All I can remember is that you came here and made a fool of me. Jeffers sent you ahead to make sure I wasn't connected with the Pickenses and that no sheriffs would be nosing around to ask if I knew anything about my brother's whereabouts. You made sure it was safe; then slipped out at night and gave Jeffers the word."

"She does what I tell her," Jeffers said.

"Would you beat me if I didn't?" she laughed.

"Might, at that."

Brad turned, let his gaze touch the peg where his sixgun hung, and wasn't surprised to see the peg empty. Jeffers had the gun hidden. They were here and planned to roost here until the heat was off.

Brad turned back toward the bedroom. "Ed needs a doctor."

"He's had a doctor. A gent south of Goliad," Jeffers said. "The doctor got the bullet out. Nothing left now but to see if Ed is strong enough to make the grade."

Jeffers caught the change in Brad's eyes and laughed without mirth. "The doctor won't do any talking about which way we went. Soon's he finished his job, he had an accident. Gun he was cleaning went off in his face."

A cold shudder passed along Brad's spine. He remembered what Laura had said about riding over this morning. Acting on his wish. Intending to help a jobless, homeless girl. A feeling of emptiness hit him like a physical blow.

Jeffers stood balanced, watching him, waiting. Elena too was waiting. Brad could hear her breathing across the room. He let his shoulders relax. "How about fixing me some breakfast?"

Her smile flashed. "Sure, Brad."

Jeffers lounged against the wall. "That's better, Brad. Hell, for a minute there I thought you was going to forget that he's your brother and we're your friends."

Brad moved to the kitchen, keeping his face away from Jeffers. "You can't stay. Some of the hands from the Hammer have been helping me fill in a slough below my south meadow. They'll be over by eight o'clock."

"Now, Brad," Jeffers chided. "No cause to lie. You ain't been filling any slough. We watched the place for a day and a half from an up-creek camp before sending Elena in."

"You cover all the angles, don't you, Jeffers?"

"I try to. Elena, fry the man an egg."

Elena brushed against Brad as she went into the kitchen.

THE BACK DOOR opened and Clem Hathaway came in with his arm loaded with wood. He dropped the wood in the box beside the stove, and pushed his floppy hat back on his shaggy head. Clem was in his late fifties, and looked like somebody's kind old uncle with his dewlapped, indolent face and mild blue eyes buried in Santa Claus puckers of flesh. He had shoulders that expanded into a comfortable paunch, and short, bowed legs. He was usually easy-going, unless liquored up. Then he was as safe to be around as a keg of dynamite with the fuse lighted.

"Howdy, Brad. You're looking good, boy. Nice place you got here."

"Yeah," Brad said.

"Sure would like to have a place like this myself where I could sit of a Sunday afternoon on the front porch and whittle while my neighbors came visiting."

"You've had your chances."

Clem scratched his curly salt-and-pepper beard. "Reckon I have, at that," he chuckled. "I'd go crazy on a place like this, tied down to it. How's the coffee situation?"

Clem sat across the table and drank coffee while Brad pecked at the eggs Elena slid onto his plate.

Maybe she's already on her way over here, Brad thought, coming because I wanted her to, asked her to.

He made a disconsolate study as he gazed out the window. Down the glade, two hundred yards away, stood the barn. Then he remembered the Winchester still in its scabbard in the barn.

Once outside, and given half a minute, he could reach the barn. With the Winchester in his hands, the odds would be cut considerably.

Clem and Elena were watching him. He turned back to his food, eating slowly, his mind racing. The rifle might as well be on the moon, unless he could get to the barn by a trick. Either Clem or Jeffers could cut him down before he'd covered half the distance.

Brad pushed his empty plate back. From the bedroom, Ed began to call for water. Elena picked up a clean dish towel and a glass of water. Brad moved beside her to the bedroom, pushing by Jeffers in the parlor.

Brad sat beside the bed, reaching out to push the sweat-wet hair from Ed's broad brow. Elena bent over, dipping the white cloth and dropping water on the fever-cracked lips.

Brad was aware of the warmth of her beside him, the honey hair falling about her doll-like face. Ed dropped into heavy slumber and Brad stood up.

Elena made no move away from Brad, but stood looking up at him with a challenge in her eyes, caring nothing for the fact that Jeffers, in the next room, might look in on them and find them standing close together.

"Don't be sore at me, Brad. I had to do what Jeffers said."

"Why?"

"He's my husband—and you walked out on me once, remember?"

He studied her sultry eyes. "And it's eaten on you all this time."

She shrugged.

"All right," he said. "You think we're even now."

"I've shown you can't kick me around. Why do you have to be so stiff-necked and righteous?"

"I didn't know I was."

She laughed softly. "You wear that shell around yourself. You set yourself apart as a little better than the rest of us."

"No better—just different, maybe."

"You don't sound very sure."

"I'm not. The past has strong fingers."

She stood with hands on hips. "So has the present. The right word from me, and Jeffers would kill you."

HE STARED at the softly beautiful face and seething eyes. The poison had been a long time distilling in her.

Jeffers came and stood in the doorway. "Is Ed all right?"

"He still doesn't recognize me," Brad

"This is your last warning, Clem," Brad called

said in a flat voice. "He's sleeping."

"Then no call for you two holding palaver in here," Jeffers suggested.

With a mirthless smile for Brad, Elena turned and went out of the room.

Brad started out. Jeffers blocked his way, cool and distant. "Don't be hanging around my wife, Brad."

Brad felt a metallic taste erupt in his mouth. "The fact that I was first with her once eating you?"

The flush of color in Jeffers's cheeks admitted the truth of the statement. "I don't want trouble with you."

"I don't want anything from you either, Jeffers, except for you to saddle, and ride."

"The climate is too hot for that right now. Get one thing straight, Brad. We're staying until it's safe for us to move in open country."

"Then keep your wife away from me. Don't throw her at my head, like you did last night."

Jeffers's hawk face flamed. "I don't owe you an explanation, but I'll give you one. I had to send Elena in first, so you'd be unaware of what was going to happen and she could find out the truth of how safe it would be here. But I was watching. If you'd come toward the house last night, thinking she was alone, I'd have cut you down."

It was a long speech for Jeffers; he turned and went into the parlor, where Clem Hathaway was sitting by a window smoking.

Clem studied Jeffers's face; then glanced at Brad as if he would say something. But he remained silent.

At that moment, the distant sound of hoofbeats came to them. Brad felt his heart lurch sickeningly. But he forced a mocking laugh. "Riders from the Hammer," he said. "So I was lying about the slough?"

Clem turned to look out the window, and Jeffers sprang to his side. Brad twisted his body, reached behind him, and grasped the heavy fireplace poker.

He struck quick and hard, smashing Clem across the shoulder, swinging the poker in a quick arc at Jeffers's head. Jeffers eeled to one side. The poker missed his temple, laying his cheek open, knocking him down.

Brad almost tore the door from its leather hinges. He was outside, aware of quick movement behind him. The flesh of his back puckered in anticipation of the impact of a bullet. But he gave little thought to that. He was thinking only of the rider.

It was Laura, and she saw him, waved, and spurred forward in a fresh burst of speed.

"Get back!" he shouted. "Ride for help! They're . . ."

He heard a rasping curse, whirled and brought the poker around. Clem moved with deceptive speed for a man of his build, coming in under the blow. He caught Brad by the throat and slugged with his gun. They tripped, fell. Brad tried to roll free. He got one short glance of Laura bringing her mount back on its haunches.

The length of the poker hampered him in its use. Clem slugged with the gun again and brief fire exploded across Brad's vision. He felt his nose spurting blood. It rolled over his lips, the taste and smell of it gagging him.

He jabbed the poker at Clem's gut like a blunt spear. It glanced from Clem's belt buckle, and the next blow of the gun knocked the starch from Brad. His spirit yearned to continue the struggle, but his muscles were lax, liquid.

He rolled to a spread-legged, sitting position, sprayed blood with each heave of his breath. Earth and sky made slow circular movements and against the swirling backdrop he saw Laura turning her horse. He heard Jeffers's shout to halt, and then crashing gunfire.

THREE times Jeffers shot. The horse dug its muzzle into the ground, pitching Laura over its head. She rolled and lay still. The horse was screaming, lying on its side with its legs moving in convulsions.

Clem watched Brad as Brad climbed to his feet. Brad left the poker, forgotten, and stumbled toward Laura.

Jeffers ran up beside him, and they reached the fallen horse together Jeffers, without change of expression, put a bullet through the horse's brain to take it out of its misery. Brad knelt beside Laura He turned her on her back. There was no blood on her and she was breathing evenly, though her eyes were closed and her face pale.

"I aimed for the mount," Jeffers said.

Brad looked up at him and swallowed, saying nothing. He picked Laura up, her head and knees draped across his arms, and moved toward the house.

Elena was standing on the small, sagging porch of the cabin Brad looked straight into her eyes as he mounted the steps one by one. Elena paled, touched her tongue to her lips.

"She was coming to help you get some clothes, a job," Brad said

"Blast you!" Elena's voice was thick in her throat. "Don't look at me that way! It makes me wish Jeffers had killed her."

Clem entered the cabin behind Brad.

"Get a quilt and fold it before the fireplace," Brad said.

Clem quietly obeyed the order. His heavy, hanging face was clotted with dust and blood from the fight He came out of the bedroom, spread the quilt, and Brad laid Laura down on it. Clem wiped at his beard with his bandanna; then without speaking he went out of the room to return with the wooden water bucket from the back porch, a clean sacking towel draped across his arm

Jeffers and Elena joined Clem, the three standing over Brad as he bathed Laura's face with cool water. She stirred, murmured a sighing groan, and opened her eyes. She looked at the blood caking Brad's nostrils and mouth, lifted her gaze beyond him and saw Clem, Jeffers, and Elena.

"My brother's in the bedroom, out of his head with fever from infection—" Brad explained. "They came in the night."

"Then the girl's arrival was a put-up job."

"Yes," Brad said, "I didn't have a chance to warn you at all before they—"

Behind Brad, Elena laughed softly. Laura lay for a moment without moving, as if she were turning the sound over and over in her mind. Then she looked up at Elena and Brad watched something new being born in Laura's eyes, something deep and burning. Brad had seen the same blaze in Mike Simmons's eyes when the old man thought wind, hell, or humanity was going to threaten him.

"Help me up, Brad."

"Sure you're all right?"

She nodded, reached for his hands, and got slowly to her feet. Clem picked up the water bucket and disappeared to the back porch, where they heard him snorting and washing away the fight grime. Elena studied Laura and Brad. She seemed to be flaying herself with the sight; a seething light boiled up in her soft blue eyes, and she turned her child-like face away.

JEFFERS stood and refilled the cylinder of his righthand gun.

Brad helped Laura to a chair, turned to Jeffers. "Your plans are a little complicated now," he reminded. "Leave Ed here and hit saddle."

"I'm not venturing into open country and run the risk of a posse."

"You can't hold Laura," Brad said.

"Why not?" Elena demanded.

Brad gave his head a short shake. "When she doesn't show up, old man Simmons will get alarmed. He'll think she's had an accident. He'll hunt her. He'll come here to ask about her. He won't be long in doing it, either."

"I wouldn't know about that," Elena said, "I never had anybody feel that way about me. But I guess you're right."

"You'll have the whole strength of the Hammer down on you."

"We won't hold her in a way that'll make that happen," Elena said. "You're the strong link binding her to our welfare, Brad. Tonight she'll eat supper at the Hammer, and tomorrow within an hour of sunrise, she rides back here alone and unarmed unless she wants something to hap-

pen to you—something real bad, soon."

"It sounds like a long chance," Jeffers said.

"Only because you don't understand the fool thing called loyalty," Elena said. She glanced at Laura. "You'll do it, won't you, honey?"

"Given no choice, I will. I'll also find out if that blonde mop is a wig if I get the chance."

"You'd think somebody had dropped you in with a sackful of wildcats if you try," Elena said.

"Both of you pipe down," Jeffers ordered. "We'll do it that way. You just make yourself at home for the day, Miss Simmons, and when sundown approaches you'll ride home and act exactly natural—unless you want a bullet in Brad's brain."

"Nice deal," Brad said, "having a woman do your thinking for you."

Jeffers shrugged without changing expression. "You keep in line, too—or next time I shoot at her instead of a horse."

Clem entered the room, blood and grime washed from his face. Brad started across the room. Jeffers said, "Where do you think you're going?"

"To wash my face. Then I've got stock that needs watering and feeding."

"Stick with him, Clem," Jeffers commanded.

With Clem like a shadow beside him, Brad went to the back porch, poured water in the tin basin, and bathed his tender nose. It started bleeding again, and he continued to douse it with cold water until the drippings paled to light crimson and then became clear.

Clem leaned against the wall, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. "No hard feelings about the fight, Brad?"

Brad shrugged.

"I was in favor of pushing on. I reckon you've worked hard here. Seems tough to have your play messed up." He tore off a piece of plug tobacco and worked it between his bruised lips.

Brad hung up the towel. "What do you hope to get out of this, Clem?"

Clem screwed up his lips and spat brown juice. "A little more living, I reckon. Another hour, day, maybe a year. Just be peaceable with us, Brad. We don't mean you no real harm."

Brad wondered if Clem were fool enough to include Elena in the statement.

BRAD WENT back in the house, entered the kitchen, shook up the fire, and put on some beef to make broth.

"For Ed?" Clem asked.

Brad nodded. "The stock can wait that much longer."

He moved about the stove. Then Clem brushed behind him, reached to the slotted rack on the wall, and drew out the butcher knife. With his puckish eyes on Brad, he snapped the blade of the knife and threw the broken pieces behind the wood box.

"You think I'm a fool, Clem?"

"I sure as hell do. A smart, tough, dogged, determined fool. Now go on fixing that broth."

When the broth was ready, Brad carried it into the bedroom. Laura joined him, her eyes troubled as she looked at the wasted young giant on the bed.

Brad forced a few spoonfuls of broth past the parched lips. Ed began talking in disjoined, incoherent phrases about a darkened room and the smell of camphor.

"He's back in Mom's room, the night she died," Brad said, a thickness in his voice. "Maybe the beef broth touched off the memory. We were feeding it to her that night."

"He needs a doctor."

Brad nodded. He heard Clem shift from one foot to the other in the doorway. "Jeffers would start shooting first."

Laura reached for the small bowl. "It's going to take time to get all this into his stomach, and he needs it. Let me do it."

He handed her the bowl, bent and kissed her ear, whispering, "Saddlegun in the barn."

The pressure of her fingers as she took the bowl showed him she understood.

"See to your stock, Brad. I'll take care of Ed."

Brad walked from the room, Clem turn-

ing to dog his heels. Elena lazily watched them pass through the parlor. Her loss of sleep was showing in the pallor beneath the tan of her skin. Jeffers stood by the window, looking out every now and then, impassive, immovable. His cheek was turning purple where the poker had struck it.

Brad went out in the cool air of morning. Clem fell in beside him. In silence they moved toward the barn. Brad felt his nerves beginning to crawl tight, a bead of sweat going icy on his forehead. The thought of the gun filled Brad's mind so thoroughly it was hard to think that Clem didn't know or suspect something of it.

Closer and closer the barn loomed; then they were in the shadow of its doorway.

"Wait a minute." Clem laid a hand on his arm.

Brad glanced at him.

"What you got in here needs feeding?"

"Just the milk cow."

"I'll bring her out. We'll graze her by the creek."

Brad forced himself to laugh. "You needn't bother with my chore, Clem. It'll take just a . . . ."

"I'll bring her out," Clem repeated. "You're a damn fool, Brad. You proved it when you jumped the two of us with the poker."

"No pokers in here," Brad kidded.

"True," Clem said, "but I don't hanker to take chances on a singletree, coupling iron, or pitchfork being handy. Wouldn't give me any pleasure to shoot you to death, Brad. Now just stand easy and we'll fetch bossy to some crick grass and milk her down there."

Brad felt his muscles go slack and loose. Nothing was going to happen, and the letdown made him go faintly sick.

HE STOOD framed in the barn doorway. The cow was in the first stall, beginning to low with the pain of her heavy udder. Clem sidled into the barn, not turning his back completely to Brad.

Brad forced his body into an attitude of careless nonchalance, trying to keep his gaze from riveting to the Winchester leaning against the rear wall in the shadows. A black sense of failure flooded over him. Clem would surely see the gun.

Then Clem was leading the cow from the barn. Keeping his attention on Brad, he had missed the gun. He handed Brad the halter rope, jerked his head toward the creek. Brad led the cow, Clem beside him.

I don't think I can do it again, Brad thought. I don't believe I can screw my nerve up a second time to make a break for the gun. . . .

The sun dragged its interminable way across the heavens. Clem sat before the fireplace, whittling and nursing his tobacco in his cheek. Elena slept in the old Morris chair Brad had repaired when he put his few dollars down on the place. Jeffers had cut squares from the pasteboard of a hardtack box and made himself a deck of cards. He sat at the kitchen table playing solitaire.

Laura stood leaning against the jamb, staring through the open doorway. Brad sat near Clem, looking at her, waiting for what he didn't know. He thought of the way she'd questioned with her troubled eyes when he and Clem had returned to the house. Warned of the gun's existence in the barn, she, too, had been ready for a desperate try of her own, a plunge through a window, a break toward the sheltering brush of the creek when the first burst of gunfire should attract the attention of Jeffers and Elena.

But no gunfire had sounded. And that had been worse than wild, crazy action would have been.

She understood, Brad knew. She realized that something had happened at the barn to make a try for the gun impossible. She didn't blame Brad. But that didn't help his feelings much, or dispel his sense of failure.

Ed began talking about a pinto horse and a Mexican girl and a jug of mescal.

Brad rose, moved to the bedroom. Ed was sitting up in bed. "Hello, Tolly," he said, looking at Brad with glazed blue eyes. "The Jimsons are laying for you down by the livery. They're figuring to jump you when you go after your horse, Tolly. Bet-

ter borrow a horse and get out of town when you leave the saloon. There's four of the Jimsons, Tolly . . ."

Laura entered the bedroom with Brad. "He's talking about the brother who was killed in the gunfight?"

"Yes," Brad said, "he thinks I'm Tolly."

Ed grabbed Brad's hand in both of his. "Tolly, me and the old man rode, but they was gone. You chased them off, Tolly! Perrywinkle at the store said they'd killed you."

"You pay Perrywinkle no mind," Brad said. "Just relax and rest now. It's been a long, hard ride."

"Sure has, Tolly. Raining part of the time. Cold rain with sleet mixed in it."

Brad eased Ed back in bed. Ed's eyes dropped closed; his breathing slowed, became regular.

There was a pan of water and a cloth on a table beside the bed. Laura dipped the cloth, wiped Ed's sweating face.

Brad passed the back of his hand over his forehead. He left the room and went into the kitchen.

Jeffers looked up from his game.

"You've got to let us get a doctor," Brad said. And for the first time he heard his voice break, a pleading note creeping into it.

"Sorry," Jeffers shook his head.

"You brought him here. You wanted him to live that much."

"I want him to live," Jeffers said. "I hope he's man enough to make it."

"But no doctor?"

"No."

Brad stood breathing shallowly, breath passing no deeper than his throat. "You can't hide here indefinitely."

"Don't intend to. Just three or four days, until the posses run out of grub and head back home." Jeffers turned a pasteboard over. "Meantime it's useless to talk."

Brad looked at Jeffers's impassive face a moment longer; then he walked out to the porch and sat down on the railing.

Clem followed him, sat down near him.

"Hot out here."

"Then go in the house."

"Now, Brad, I can't do that."

INSECTS hummed and the sinking sun made a lake of heat in the distance. Inside the house, Laura cried out Brad's name. He swung his legs across the sapling rail, and rushed into the parlor in time to see Laura loose her grip on Ed, who was going out the back door.

Mad with fever, Ed jumped from the porch and moved toward the creek. He was telling his brother Tolly to hang on, the Jimsons weren't big enough to stop the Pickens clan.

Laura leaped after Ed. Jeffers upset the kitchen table, vaulted the back porch rail, and ran down the slope. Like a giant oak shuddering out the last of its strength before falling, Ed plunged on toward the creek.

Clem grabbed Brad's shirt. Fabric ripped as they stumbled from the back porch together. Beyond Clem, Brad saw Elena standing in the back doorway.

"Hold it!" Clem said. "Jeffers'll bring him back."

Jeffers reached Ed, caught his arm, and Ed slugged him. Jeffers fell. Ed picked up a heavy, weather-hardened limb and struck. Jeffers moved from side to side to avoid the blows. The limb struck his shoulder. Jeffers stumbled to his knees. Ed raised the limb high to brain Jeffers. Brad heard Clem draw in his breath. Clem pulled his gun, swinging it toward Ed. Brad grabbed the gun wrist and hit Clem with all his strength. Clem stumbled; his spurs tangled and tripped him, and Brad got the gun. Brad put his knee hard against Clem's chin, broke away, leaving Clem addled on hands and knees.

Brad whirled just in time to see Jeffers draw and shoot Ed. He saw the bullet bite into Ed's massive chest, the chest fold as if under a giant blow.

Ed pitched forward, and Brad knew there was only one Pickens left alive. Choked with rage, sweat seeping in and scorching his narrowed eyes, Brad snapped a shot at Jeffers with Clem's gun.

Jeffers snapped off two quick shots. Brad felt the wind burn of them. Behind him, he heard Elena scream, and he knew

she had been in line of fire. Jeffers's bullet had hit her.

Jeffers dropped behind a stump. Brad was in the open, between Jeffers and Clem. Laura was almost to the barn, running in a crouch, lightly as a doe. Brad dove around the corner of the house, keeping Jeffers down with two more shots. He cut for the barn, using a fourth and fifth shot as he ran.

He dove through the barn door as Jeffers's bullet put a hot welt across his back. Laura grabbed him, pulled him forward, and he scrambled to his feet. He was trembling in every muscle, heavy drops of sweat rolling down his face. His lips were flat, his eyes hot. "The swine, the dirty, worthless, merciless pigs."

He felt light-headed, a little off-balance, but he didn't care. For years he'd carried a knot inside of him; now it had burst, and he could taste the poison of it. He moved to the rear of the barn, snatched the Winchester from its scabbard, levered a cartridge into the chamber.

He thrust Clem's sixgun into Laura's hand. "There's one bullet left. No matter what happens, Jeffers must never leave here. The bullet has got Jeffers's name on it."

Her dark hair was sweat-tangled about her face. Her cheeks looked glazed and some of the light in Brad's eyes was reflected in her own.

She caught his wrist. "Brad . . ." And then she released him, looking into his face. "I understand," she said. "Jeffers is all the running, the hatefulness, the meanness, the whole past."

A SHOUT came from the house. Brad turned in that direction. Clem had got to his feet, drawn his second gun. Jeffers was leaning over Elena, who sat on the back porch propped against the house. Brad could catch her moans, and saw that she was holding her stomach as if trying to tear away pain.

Jeffers turned, dropped from the back porch like a cat.

"Elena needs help," he shouted. "You've only got one bullet left. Come out, Brad, and you and the girl will live."

"You come and get me and the girl," Brad shouted back.

"Don't be a fool," Clem advised with a wave of his gun. "If you make the cards fall that way, we'll have to kill you."

"That would trouble you, wouldn't it, Clem?"

"Sure would, but what has to be has to be. Look, boy, you only got one bullet. You can't shoot us both."

Brad, in the shadows of the barn doorway, stroked the stock of the Winchester. "I wonder which it'll be?"

Jeffers moved to Clem and they hunkered in the shadows of the porch; the angle made a shot hard.

While they palavered, Brad drew Laura over to him. His gaze took in every detail of her face. "I figured they'd come quick. Now you've got a chance. Slide out that back window, make for the corral. You'll have a long stretch of open field to cross, but I'll cover you. I'll see that you make it."

"It would empty the Winchester."

"You'd be on your way by then. You could bring some of the boys back from the Hammer."

He felt a quivering in her shoulders. Then tears came abruptly. No weeping; no sobbing; just bright diamonds of moisture on her lids.

"And what would we find when we got back? My life, lying in the dust."

"Quit that kind of talk! You've got to go."

"You're not married to me yet, Brad Pickens. I refuse to take the order."

He put his arm about her and brushed her cheek with his lips. Then he released her.

Clem and Jeffers had started their play. They'd overturned the massive oaken rain barrel behind the house and moved toward the creek, pushing the rain barrel before them.

Clem broke, dove into the brush before Brad could fire. He started moving down creek and Jeffers began working the barrel

at an angle up the long slope away from the creek.

"I know what's in his mind," Brad said. "He figures I'll go mighty slow about wasting what he thinks is the last bullet. He reckons one of them will get close enough to fire the brush or grass. When the flames reach the barn and this loft of hay, we'll come out in a hurry or be cooked alive."

Jeffers was moving slowly, staying out of sixgun range. Clem was making more speed. Brad could mark his progress by the shaking of a bush or sapling now and then.

"Last warning, Clem!"

"Now, Brad, you wouldn't use that final bullet in my direction."

"I've got plenty of bullets."

"Don't let him bluff you, Clem," Jeffers shouted. "Close in."

Clem obeyed the order. Brad raised the rifle to his shoulder. His face congealed, as if turning to hewn, hard maple. He saw a bush shake, and he fired.

CLEM MADE a cry like a bull moose. He stood up, fell backward, and Brad heard the echo of the splash. In a few moments, Clem's body washed down the creek, lodging face-down where the creek raced over stony shallows.

The barrel had stopped its slow journey. Jeffers endured stunned silence before saying, "That was no sixgun."

"You're mighty right it wasn't. It was the crack of a rifle. The oak in that barrel might scotch a sixgun slug from long range, but it won't stop a steel-jacketed rifle bullet, Jeffers. I'm coming after you."

Brad dropped low and ran a few steps, then dropped behind the watering trough. He raised, pumped a bullet, and saw splinters jump from the barrel.

He slid around the end of the trough. The barrel was still a great impediment. He might empty the rifle into it without doing more than scratching Jeffers.

Jeffers heard his movement and couldn't fail to realize that in short seconds the rifle would be barking at him from a new angle where the barrel wouldn't help.

Jeffers shot one glance around the end of the barrel, shifted it to correct aim, and gave it a shove.

The barrel came booming and bouncing at Brad, heavy enough to smash him. Brad almost gave way to the surprise Jeffers had counted on. He glimpsed Jeffers on one knee, fanning his sixgun.

He swiveled the rifle on his hip, ignoring everything but the man before him. He fired, and with that sixth sense of the marksman he knew his aim had been true. Jeffers dropped his gun, sat a moment on one knee. Then he pitched to his side. Brad plunged to one side as the barrel, with a bounce, loomed over him. The barrel missed him by inches, crashing against the barn, as Brad staggered to his feet.

And with the crash, like an echo, came the bark of a six-gun. He turned, and he saw Elena lying on her face near the house, a gun near her hand. Then he saw Laura, holding herself stiff and straight, coming from the barn toward him. Clem's smoking sixgun dangling at her side.

Laura lifted the gun, stared at it, and with a cry in her throat threw it from her. Brad gathered her into his arms. She shuddered with reaction.

"She crawled from the porch, Brad. Then I saw the gun in her hand. She raised it. She was going to shoot you in the back. I—I fired the final bullet, Brad."

He held her close, and looked at Elena down the slope. She had the gamin face of an innocent doll, but what she couldn't have she would kill.

IT WAS late that night before Brad got back to the Hammer ranch house. He threw reins over the hitch-rail, mounted the porch, and Mike Simmons's voice came to him out of the darkness down the porch: "Been waiting. Figured you'd ride this way."

Mike rose, hobbled down the porch. "Come in. Few things I've got to say to you."

Brad was haggard, but there was a calm light in his eyes. The last hours had been crowded, sheriff and deputies going out to

clean up the carnage and bring back the bodies in wagons. He recalled the hush that had fallen on San Miguel, and the way men had stared at Brad Ledbetter Pickens, who'd walked with his head high and a friendly smile on his lips. The first handshake, from the sheriff himself, started the thawing out of these strangers.

Brad followed Mike into the cavernous front room, with its bearskin rug and heavy chairs before a fireplace large enough to take logs.

Mike rubbed his rheumatically-gnarled knuckles against his cheek. "You know you got one hell of a nerve, keeping the truth about yourself from folks. I always had the feeling there was something you was hiding."

Brad colored a little at the prodding tone. "I don't mean to speak disrespectful to a man crippled with rheumatism—"

"Who says I'm crippled!"

Brad held up his hand. "—but I'm going to tell you something anyway. I discovered something today. Running is no good. If I'd never hidden, Jeffers, Clem, and the girl couldn't have used my place and showed me—and Laura—the face of death. I've let the Pickens name run me for the last time, Simmons. I came here with honest, hard-earned money, saved a dollar at a time. And here I'm staying. To earn the respect of my neighbors and live like a man, to put down roots, build my herds, marry a good woman, and raise a family. And when I'm old and plagued with rheumatism I'll sit on my front porch and snort and cuss a little and take nothing from any man, because I'll look out over the land and know I've earned my right to it."

Mike's eyes began to twinkle. "You sound pretty sure of yourself."

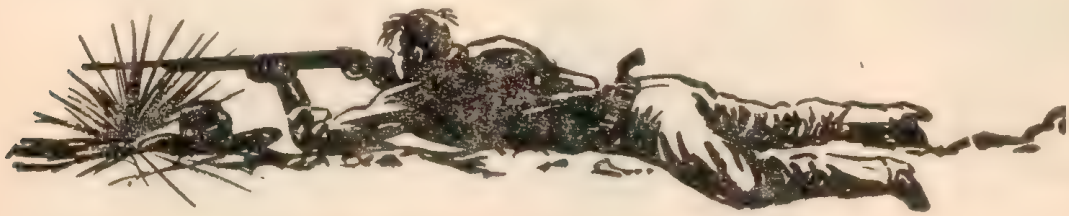
"I am. I'm going to marry your daughter, Mike, if she'll have me."

"She'll have you," Laura's voice came quietly.

Both men turned. Laura was standing across the room, limned in yellow lamplight. Her hair was loose about her shoulders and she was clad in a long, white nightgown that draped to her ankles.

She came forward smiling, slipped her left arm about Mike's neck, her right about Brad's.

Mike cleared his throat. "Thought you was in bed. Confound it, don't know what this younger generation is coming to. You traipsing in here in your nightgown when you ain't even married to this hard-headed galoot—" Mike grinned—"yet."



KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 62)

1. Wild parsnip, water parsnip, poison parsnip.
2. Five to seven.
3. As a champ rodeo roper some years back and later as a rodeo producer and founder of the national steer roping contest at Laramie, Wyo.
4. Vinegarroon, of which correct Spanish spelling is Vinegarron.
5. Montana.
6. Turkey.
7. The Alamo.
8. Billy the Kid.
9. Prescott.
10. Texas.

By Lee Cummings

A ROOF IS

Rosita was wearing her prettiest dress

A ROOF

ROSITA, the gypsy woman, ran swiftly toward the field where her husband and young son were cutting fodder. In one brown hand she caught up the folds of her red and yellow skirt; in the other she clutched the letter.

Rosita's heart had almost stopped beating when she saw the rural carrier drop that letter into the mailbox. There had been but one other communication from the outside world during the three years she and Paco and their children, Chal and Matt, had lived in the Santa Clara Valley. That other letter told them of the death of Paco's mother. What news would this one bring? She called anxiously, "Paco! Chal! A letter, a letter!" and waved it above her head.

Paco ran toward her, his long legs taking the ploughed furrows two at a time. He threw down his reaping hook, and snatching the envelope from his wife's hand, peered at it. "I know this writing," he cried. "It's from Tanfi. Besides, she's the only one of the relatives who knows how to write. Chal will read it for us."

He handed the letter to ten-year-old Chal, who had followed close behind him and whose black eyes were wide with expectancy. "Now we'll see whether going to school has done you any good. Read!"

The gypsy boy took the letter from the envelope. "The writing is very bad," he complained. "It's been written with pencil and is all smudged."

"Never mind," said Paco impatiently. "Read!"

Chal began haltingly, "Dear—brother-in-law: Your father asks me to write you. There will be a reunion of the brotherhood near Sac-Sacramento. Your sister Felicia is getting married. Your father wishes you and your family to come. He is growing old and wants to see his grandsons. The wedding will take place when you arrive. If you cannot come, send a letter to General Delivery, Sacramento. The relatives send love. Tanfi."

Paco ran excited fingers through his long wavy hair. His handsome face, that looked chiseled from bronze, lighted up with happiness. "My youngest sister to be married! Well, it's high time—she's fifteen. They don't say who the lucky *chavo* is. What do we know

HERE ARE the gypsies again, Rosita thought with dread,

luring her man away with the magic of their freedom

of the tribe since we came here? Just think, in a few days we'll see all the relatives." There was no mistaking the feeling of joy that surged over him.

Rosita said, "Your father invites us to the wedding. That must mean he's forgiven us for leaving the caravan."

"Yes, I suppose so. I'm glad." He added, "There will be a big feast before the wedding. Who knows how many families will come? We'll see all our old friends, and—"

Rosita interrupted these happy reflections. "We can't go," she said with flat finality.

The happiness faded from Paco's face. His dark eyes clouded. "Why—why not?"

"Why not?" echoed Chal, obviously disappointed.

"Because," Rosita answered, "there are prunes to be gathered and sold. Stock to be fed and watered. Because the black mare will foal any day. Because—"

"Because," Paco broke in, "like a stupid fool I let you persuade—I mean—like a fool I bought this farm and am tied down."

She thought, he's hot and tired from work in the field. He'll feel better when he's rested and has eaten a good supper. "Come," she said, "there's been enough work for one day. Let's go to the house."

PACO PICKED UP his reaping hook and stalked ahead of her. She knew by the slope of his shoulders and the droop of his head, that his heart was heavy. As she followed her husband, Rosita looked about her at the prune trees heavy with purple fruit, at the corral with its sleek horse and cow. How they had struggled to have this place! To her, it had been worth the struggle. If she could only make Paco realize how lucky they were to have this land with half the payments made, to live in their own home, even though it was meagerly furnished! Flowered curtains hung at the windows. Geraniums bloomed in the dooryard. What more could anyone want? Her dark, velvety eyes lingered lovingly on these dear familiar things. It's home; it's good, she thought. I don't want to leave it as long as I live.

As they entered the house Paco exclaimed, "What a crazy fool I've been! Gypsies don't stay in one spot day after day, year after year. My father used to brag that he'd never seen the sun set twice over the same hilltop."

"What was the good of that? Hilltops are pretty much the same, and fine sunsets may be had anywhere in the world. You should be glad we have a good roof over our heads, live honest lives, and send our children to school."

"A roof is nothing but a roof," he answered, "whether it's on a house or on a gypsy's *vardo*. You know I want to please you, Rosita, but I can't stand it much longer—this sweating in a field, never having any pleasure when we might be with our own people living comfortably off the countryside. I tell you I can't stand it. Some day we'll leave this place forever. We'll live as gypsies should live." He slumped heavily down upon the doorstep, head in hands, and lapsed into gloomy silence.

Fear gripped Rosita's heart. This was no ordinary mood that she could humor him out of. He really hated the farm. And all the time she had thought he was commencing to realize that this way of life was best—best for the children, best for them all. Would the time come when even Paco's love for her would not hold him here—when the call of the ages would send him again to the open road?

She tied on her apron and went to the lean-to-kitchen, where she put kindling into the range and set a match to it. What could she do to cheer her man? She'd fix his favorite dish. That would make his eyes shine.

AS SHE prepared the ham and vegetables Rosita's mind went back to the happy time when she was just fifteen and she and Paco first met. Two caravans had come together in Colorado. The old people knew each other well, but the boys and girls were strangers. A feast was held to celebrate the reunion.

Since the night was chilly, they sat in a great circle about a campfire. She remem-

bered looking across the fire and seeing Paco, tall and handsome, standing back a little way and watching her intently. When his glance met hers, he flashed her a brilliant smile. Her heart seemed to turn over, and she could not get her breath. She knew, in that moment, that he was her *rom* —that there could never be any other man for her.

The next day Paco disappeared and returned to camp with a truck across whose peeling sides marched the words, Snodd's Home Bakery. Whistling lustily he cut windows in the sides, and then wielded a paint brush. Rosita, secretly watching the proceedings from her parents' *vardo*, was torn between hope and despair. Was the beautiful little green and yellow house on wheels intended for her? That look of Paco's—had she only imagined it? Oh, misery of miseries, suppose there was another girl!

Her fears were short-lived. In due time Paco spoke to her father, and a fortnight later they were married.

The following years had been happy, for the most part, though theirs was not an easy life—not for the women anyway. She recalled the endless wanderings, often with a sheriff in pursuit because some member of the caravan had been in a fight or had cheated a local resident. She remembered her beak-nosed mother-in-law with her piercing eyes. She remembered—how could she ever forget?—her jealous sisters-in-law, who resented the fact that she and Paco were still in love and living happily, whereas for them the honeymoon was a dim memory. While the two caravans traveled together Rosita had not minded, but when the time for parting came, the elders decreed that she and Paco should join his people.

One day when the women were sorting rags, Tanfi, her scrawny sister-in-law, said enviously, "Rosita, what kind of spell have you put on Paco? After six years of marriage he still eats from your hand. Before he married you he was the worst scrapper of the lot. Even now he would slit the throat of any man who angered him. Yet, with you—"

Rosita's hateful mother-in-law took the pipe from her mouth and croaked, "Wait! Wait till she's borne him ten children and her beauty is gone. Then Paco will be like any other man. Then she'll have no ring in his nose." And her cackling laugh seemed to say, "May that day come quickly."

Paco's relatives resented her keeping the *vardo* and her person clean. She washed and mended her clothing instead of wearing it until it was in rags. They accused her of putting on airs. Rosita hated the begging, and the fortune-telling, and the rag-picking that Paco's clan thrived on.

Her own people earned their living gathering roadside herbs—dock, thistles, lobelia and the like. The ignorant farmers called them "weeds" and were glad to have them taken away, but the herb dealers paid good prices for them. How much happier life was in her caravan than among Paco's people! Very often she thought, "If only we could get away from these snooping, jealous relatives!" and patiently she began to plant in her husband's mind the idea that they should have their own place.

Once, when Paco, injured in a fight, lay in the *vardo* with his swollen head tied up in herb poultices, Rosita said, "It's no good—this wandering, this fighting. Some day we'll settle in a place of our own where we can do as we please, and send Matt and Chal to school."

Then, one May morning, the caravan reached the valley. The fruit trees were a mass of blossoms, the air drowsy with perfume. Down in the valley Rosita spied a cottage surrounded by orchard. "How peaceful, how lovely!" she thought wistfully. "If we only had such a home!"

As they neared the house, she saw a man nailing up a sign. Tanfi, riding with them, said, "This place is for sale."

ROSITA'S memories were interrupted by six-year-old Matt, who came from the creek carrying a pail. "Look Mother, four fish—the biggest I've ever caught."

She thought of Paco, huddled dejectedly on the doorstep. "Show them to your father. He'll be pleased."

Paco glanced into the bucket. "So you caught fish. What of it? Any gypsy boy your age could do as well."

The rebuffed child returned to his mother and raised hurt, inquiring eyes to her face. "Your father is tired and sad," she explained. She was not one to coddle her children, but now her eyes were tender as she looked at the wistful little face upturned to her own. "You've done well, son. Take the fish outside and clean them."

Delicious supper odors filled the house. As she set the table, Rosita touched each bright pottery dish lovingly, appreciatively. She called the family. They ate heartily, smacking their lips and licking their fingers. Between bites the children chattered of the day's happenings. Only Paco ate in moody silence, his eyes fixed on something far away.

Rosita knew that the letter had awakened memories for him, too. He was thinking of blue-grass meadows, juicy pears and apples to be had for the taking, the sweet song of meadowlarks, singing and joking around a campfire, sleeping under the stars.

But she knew he had forgotten the days when they'd followed dusty roads, the blistering sun beating down on them. He had forgotten the sudden rain or hail storms that forced them to huddle, damp and miserable, in the smelly *vardo*. It's easy to remember the joy of the road. It's easy to forget the heat, the quarrels, the sheriffs—

Her glance took in the flowered curtains, the oaken table and chairs, the orderly cupboard with its pretty dishes. She contrasted the neatness and roominess of the house with the confusion and stuffiness of the van. How wonderful to be able to keep house, to have a place for everything! This was the right way to live, rooted in the good earth, surrounded by things she knew, in a house that stayed put. The school at the crossroads; neighbors nodding in a friendly way; sleeping soundly at night—how dear to the heart of any woman! If she could only make Paco see how lucky they were!

The following week was a busy one. Chal, aided by his teacher, wrote the relatives that it was impossible to attend the wedding. The mare foaled and the children were overjoyed on seeing the wobbly black colt beside its mother. By Thursday, a carpet of purple prunes lay under the trees and the family went about the back-breaking business of putting them into crates.

On Saturday, the gypsies rose at sunup. Urged on by Rosita, they scrubbed themselves to within an inch of their lives, and put on their best clothing. She carefully combed her wavy black hair and donned her prettiest dress—the yellow one with huge red roses. She tied a pale green sash around her slender waist, and fastened in her ears the great hoops of yellow gold Paco had given her as a wedding gift. When Paco had loaded the prunes into the van, Rosita hurried out, the lunch basket on her arm, and climbed to the seat beside him. The boys perched on the crates. The engine coughed its way toward town.

Rosita gave her husband a quizzical, sidelong glance. She had so hoped the monthly trip to town would jolt him out of his depression. That sad look in his eyes—would he never again regain his usual good humor? She put on a veneer of gaiety. She sang, joked, chattered with the children in a vain attempt to cheer him. The boys, in a valiant but mistaken effort to do their share of the entertaining, sang their favorite song:

"Let others be housefast
And sleep on a pillow.
I'll lie on the earth
Beneath a green willow.
Let others be housefast
Not I Not I!
I'll lie and count stars
*On the blue arching sky."**

THE PRUNES were sold. The real estate dealer was given his payment. The gypsies ate their bread and cheese beside the road, washing it down with pop, a special treat.

As they turned homeward, Chal said, "Father, there's still time for you to go to the wedding by train. Mother and I could look after the farm."

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*Quoted from "The Shawl with the Silver Bells," by permission of the estate of the late Mrs. Crewe.

"Riding on trains costs money."

"You could earn your way reading palms."

Paco laughed disdainfully. "Me—read palms? Who ever heard of a gypsy man telling fortunes—*dukkerin* is women's work? A *rom* in his van with his tinkering tools beside him can earn his way anywhere—but on a train—humph! Besides, grandfather wants to see you boys. What

"Good morning, folks! Full of pep? Ready for our exercises?"

kind of welcome would I get—me at a wedding without my family?"

As they neared home, Chal exclaimed, "Look, fresh tire tracks beside our house!"

Paco roused from his abstraction. "He's right. Someone's been here." Leaping over the wheel, he ran to the front yard. He hesitated, stopped, stared as if he had seen a ghost. "A *patternan!*" he cried.

Rosita and the boys came running. They had heard of but had never seen a *patternan,* that arrangement of twigs, leaves and grass which can tell a gypsy as much as any letter.

Paco quivered with excitement as he pointed to some twigs stuck into the earth at various angles. "Gypsies have been here. It's my brother Juban—I'd know his sign anywhere. It says—" Rosita and the boys listened in astonishment as he explained—"it says since we couldn't come to the wedding, they're bringing the wedding to us. Juban came ahead to tell us. They'll get here tomorrow afternoon."

"Just twigs and grass say all that?" marvelled Chal.

"That, and more. They're bringing mutton and wine for the feast." His flashing smile reappeared. He waved his arms, clapped his hands, danced in sheer exuberance.

Rosita was deeply troubled. It was good to see her man happy, but what effect would the reunion have? Would he, once he had seen his relatives, be content to settle down? Or would he insist on joining them?

WHAT a heavenly wedding day! Sunshine flooded the valley. It was a day to lift anyone's spirits, but as Rosita scoured the big iron kettle, she brooded, "I wish they weren't coming. I just wish they weren't coming. This reunion can mean only trouble for us."

Whistling happily, Paco swept the broad expanse of hard-packed earth where the ceremony would be held, and hung the kettle on a tripod. He wanted to kill the yearling calf, but Rosita said, "No, we may need that calf to make a payment. I'll roast chickens. That will be our share."

Late that afternoon, a shiny blue Ford chugged up to the house and Juban, dapper in green pants and red shirt, called out, "Any gypsies live hereabouts?"

Paco and Rosita ran to greet him and Tanfi, his wife. And now, one by one, there drew up in front a score or more of cars and trailers. The occupants swarmed out. Paco called, "Brothers, sisters, you're as welcome as cool water to the thirsty."

Rosita, flushed with pride and excitement, greeted the womenfolk, and hoped

they did not see how worried she was.

What a lot of relatives! Some in-laws she'd never met. Old people with prune-like faces and piercing black eyes; mothers with babies on their arms, or else on the way; handsome half-grown boys and girls with ivory skin and hair black as night; children of every age darting here and there like water bugs.

Paco's father climbed from a van and tottered toward him on spindly legs. The two solemnly embraced. The old man put a gnarled hand, first on Chal's and then on Matt's head, as if in benediction, then gave Rosita a grudging, perfunctory greeting.

The curious eyes of the visitors took in everything. Their envy was but thinly concealed. "H-m-m! Nice place." "I suppose one gets used to living like this." "Do you really enjoy sticking in one spot?"

Now the bridegroom, a thick man of about forty with a scar across one cheek, lumbered toward them and was introduced. Rosita thought, "What a cruel face! He'd not hesitate to knife anyone who crossed him. Poor Felicia, so young and pretty! They're out of their minds to marry her to this clumsy bear."

But now the radiant Felicia was embracing her and saying, "Oh, Rosita, I'm so happy. Isn't he wonderful?"

Wonderful! The eyes of love! To think they could transform this fat, greasy fellow into an object of ardent affection!

The visitors camped in the meadow across the road amid the most unbelievable confusion—brakes screeching, people shouting, dogs barking, babies crying. Paco, right in his element, helped set up tents. Meanwhile, a hawk-nosed old woman built a fire under the kettle and dumped in pork, mutton, turnips, onions, pigeons, water and herbs. When the stew began to simmer, she dipped in a ladle, blew on it, took a gulp and smacked her lips.

AT DUSK the visitors, clad in their finery, crossed to the house. The women, in full-skirted dresses, wore bright kerchiefs on their hair. A few boasted silk shawls. Each guest carried his own bowl, cup and blanket. They formed a circle around the fire, the men and women on opposite sides, the children squatting in front.

The elder having been served, the others held out their bowls in turn for a helping of the stew. Rosita passed the chicken and filled the wine cups. A few fastidious ones ate with forks or spoons, but most of the gypsies could not be bothered with such niceties. What were their fingers for? The meal finally finished, men and women alike smoked contentedly.

There, among the men, Rosita recognized for the first time, fat, squint-eyed Zarib who once wanted to marry her. How thankful she had been that her father opposed the match. Zarib certainly had not improved with the passing of the years; he was as repulsive as ever.

Now came the wedding preliminaries. Felicia and Curro spread a blanket in the center of the ring and sat down in the firelight. The onlookers gossiped about them—the shrewdness of the man, the beauty of the girl. Curro had a quick temper, they said, but then every *Romany* had that; she'd have to learn to hold her own. Were they well matched? The groom was a trifle old but clever; why, he could outsmart any of them. No, the girl was not doing so badly but, of course, if ever she married again—

The haggling over the wedding price began in dead earnest. The bride's father loudly declared that the initial bid of two hundred dollars was an insult to his daughter. Look what Curro was getting! Certainly she was handsome. Healthy, too, and could bear him many sons.

Juban exclaimed, louder than was necessary, "No woman on earth is worth the price paid for her."

Quick as a flash, his wife snapped back, "The girl is a fool to marry at all; she'd be better off unwed."

Ah-ha, so that's the way matters stood between Juban and Tanfi.

The wedding price was raised to three hundred, five hundred, a thousand dollars. Finally a rifle and a pair of binoculars were thrown in for good measure and the

deal was completed. The elder said to Curro, "Swear that when you no longer love Felicia, you will leave her free to seek happiness elsewhere." To Felicia, he said, "Promise that if your love for Curro dies, you will leave his *vardo* forever."

The vows repeated, the newlyweds moved back with the others. With a great screeching and plucking of strings, the musicians, Paco among them, tuned their instruments. As the circle was cleared for dancing, the crowd sang:

"Winds entrapped within four walls are stale, stale;
Cheeks and lips beneath a roof are pale, pale."

A young girl, lithe and graceful as a panther, leapt into the circle. Her full yellow skirt fluttered as she whirled, stamped her feet, clapped her hands. With pagan frenzy she sprang into the air, arms raised high, as though to snatch stars from the sky. Sad and yearning at first, the tempo of the music became quick, joyful.

At last the exhausted dancer fell, half-swooning, to the ground. Two others took her place.

The violins, the frenzy of the dancing, fired hearts, made blood pound. Lips parted, white teeth flashed, eyes were too, too bright. Rosita was dismayed to see Paco, overcome by emotion, throw down his violin and join in the mad orgy. No good can come of this, she thought, Paco has had too much to drink. If they should try to influence him now, anything might happen.

Toward dawn the party ended. Trembling with exhaustion, hoarse from singing and shouting, the weary gypsies dragged themselves to their tents, or simply rolled up in their blankets and slept where they dropped under the stars.

MIDMORNING next day, the caravan prepared to leave. Leaking radiators were filled, possessions packed. The visitors, looking wild and dishevelled after the night's revelry, bade Paco and Rosita good-bye. Paco kissed the men, Rosita, the women, not on the mouth, but holding them by the ears and kissing their cheeks. They wished each other luck and happiness.

Paco's father said, "The reunion has been good. Now we must go. Too bad you're cut off from your own kind. Where will your sons find wives when the time comes—surely not among these landowners."

Juban said, "Who knows when we'll meet again? Perhaps never. We're bound for San Diego and from there—who knows? In the spring, we'll turn toward Canada."

The old man fingered his chin reflectively, "How you used to love the trout fishing, Paco! The fish bite as well as ever. A pity you can't join us. But we understand—when a man's wife—"

Paco cried out, "We're coming with you. Rosita, pack our things."

Panic-stricken, Rosita screamed, "No, no, Paco. You're out of your mind. We can't leave suddenly. The payments—"

"The devil take the payments!" yelled Paco.

"I see she still has a ring in your nose." Tanfi laughed. "How do you stand it? There's an extra van if you want to come along. Let her follow when she's attended to these things that seem so important to her."

Paco ran his hands through his hair. What should he do? If only his head didn't ache so! If only he could think! He hated the farm. He longed for the road. Last night's pleasures had brought it all back. The love of change and motion was in a gypsy's very bones. . . . His father's words, "When a man's wife—" He glanced at the circle of relatives eyeing him speculatively. If he stayed behind now they'd surely think he had a ring in his nose. Well, Rosita had had her way long enough. He'd show her—he'd show all of them who was boss. She had the van. She'd follow him. And if she didn't, devil take the woman anyway! He turned to the crowd. "I'm coming with you."

"Wait," Rosita cried, "wait till we've gathered the cabbages and boarded up the windows. We'll lose everything."

But Paco was already thrusting his grindstone and tinkering tools into the empty van. "Climb in," he shouted to the boys. Chal obeyed. Little Matt hung back, lips trembling, and looked at his mother appealingly.

"Climb in," Paco commanded. High time these boys of his learned to obey.

"Well, Rosita, coming?"

Mute with sorrow, she shook her head. The cars chugged out upon the highway. Three miles of dismal silence. Matt whimpered, "I want my mother."

"Shut up," yelled Paco.

Five more miles with no word spoken. Chal ventured, "Could we leave a *patternan* beside the road to help her find the way?"

"But your mother can't read a *patternan.*"

Four o'clock. Time to make camp but the caravan dared not stop. Juban had "borrowed" chickens from a farm. It seemed best to move on to a distant camping ground well hidden from the road. This new development worried Paco. Suppose Rosita, attempting to follow, should take a wrong turn. She might never find them. Now that his head, befuddled earlier from all the wine and dancing, was clearing, he began to realize the true situation.

AT LAST they made camp. Supper in Juban's van, with six of them dipping out of the same pot—Paco, the boys, Juban, Tanfi, and Tanfi's mother, a slovenly old woman with straggly gray hair. She reached a hand into the pot and brought up a chicken leg. The gravy, running down her arm, left a clean streak. Chal gagged and hurried toward the door. Paco wondered if the boy was going to be sick. He, himself, didn't feel like eating. The old woman said, "What ails that boy of yours? Isn't chicken good enough for him?"

Paco did not answer. He saw Chal sit down on the step, take a book from his pocket, and begin to read. A boy about his own age sauntered up and stood eyeing him. Chal glanced up. "Hello!" he called pleasantly.

"Think you're smart, reading a book, don't you?" taunted the boy. "Just like your mother—putting on airs. My father says he's glad your mother was left behind. He says she's not a gypsy at all."

The insult, a downright lie, enraged Paco. He leaped from the van and cuffed the boy. The boy yelped and his father ran toward them. "What's going on here?"

"Your boy said something bad about Rosita."

"Is that all? Well, if you stick with us, you'll get used to ugly remarks about that high-toned woman of yours."

"I'll kill you," bellowed Paco. "I'll tear off your ears and stuff them down your throat."

"Try it," sneered the other. "You can't think too much of Rosita yourself—went off and left her, didn't you?"

A bloody battle followed, everyone in camp looking on and taking sides. Paco, hardened by farm work, finally won. The fight over, the combatants were prevailed upon to shake hands. Yet an ugly atmosphere pervaded the camp. Paco saw looks exchanged, heard muttering. He had the unhappy feeling that most of them regarded him as an outsider—would rather he hadn't been victor.

Night came. He and the boys spread their blankets and tried to sleep. Chal tossed and sighed. Matt sobbed quietly in his corner. The van stank of unmentionable odors. Paco slapped at something crawling on his leg. The bed at home was clean. Rosita's cooking was clean and tasty. What if she couldn't find them? A terrifying thought came to him—suppose she was so hurt and angry she wouldn't *try* to follow!

Rosita was different from the others. She was different in ways that he liked. He thought of her, washing, mending, getting the children off to school, cooking his favorite dishes, cheerfully working beside him in the field. Yet it was not altogether Rosita the homemaker and mother he missed right now. It was also Rosita the woman, warm, satin-skinned, sweet-smelling. How pretty she looked in her flowered red and yellow dress, her hips sway-

ing lightly, gracefully, as she walked!

A lump came to his throat. Why, Rosita was worth a hundred ordinary women. She had good sense. She was right in thinking the farm a good place to raise a family.

This dragging children all over the country was senseless. Well, Chal could read. That was more than most of the others could boast about their boys. What a crazy fool he'd been.

The night was long and troubled. . . .

At sunup he went to the door. Rumbling snores came from the tents and vans. No one was in sight but Juban who, with a tin can, was filling the radiator of his Ford.

At home Rosita would be slipping into her red and white checked dress, tying on her apron, standing at the range breaking eggs into a skillet—

His reverie was broken by the sudden realization that Zarib's yellow car was gone from camp. Zarib—once Rosita's suitor —Zarib, now a widower who ogled all the young girls.

A hot wave of jealousy swept over Paco. He shook Chal and Matt. "Put on your pants. Be quick. Come with me."

Sleepily rubbing their eyes, the boys followed him to Juban's car. Paco said, "Where's Zarib?"

"I don't know. Drove off late last night."

"Which direction?"

Juban shrugged. East, west, north, south—how should I know.

Paco said, "Want to earn ten dollars?"

"Doing what?"

"Driving me and the boys."

"When?"

"Now—right away—this very minute."

"This very minute? You gone crazy, Paco? Where are you going in such a rush?"

Paco tried to make his voice sound casual as he answered, "Where would we be going but home—home where we belong?"

SHEPHERDS WEST!

EVEN in this mechanized, atom-powered, jet-propelled age, there is one vocation that hasn't changed its methods since ancient days. And since it probably never will, the sheep growers of our Western states are looking to imported sheepherders to perform the menial, hand-done chores attendant upon the lonely job of being a shepherd.

Scarcity of herders is the main reason for the decline of Arizona's sheep industry, according to Harry Embach, executive secretary of the Wool Growers Association. Even the lowly Mexicans who used to compete for working with the sheep, now scorn the lowly "woollies" and their lonesome life; they'd rather pick Arizona cotton, or hoe cantaloupes for good wages on the many irrigated farms now increasing in the state, than to minister to a shed full of lambing ewes. To alleviate the situation, Congress has passed a special act, designed to permit 500 Basque sheepherders to enter this country after they have signed a contract to herd sheep on Western ranges.

So it is up to this imported variety of herder to keep our essential industry rolling; and they'll find congenial company awaiting them when they reach their new jobs. Many of the large sheep growers of Arizona are of Basque origin, and came here years ago to herd sheep. They started flocks of their own, and have prospered greatly. These growers have advanced money for the transportation and expenses of the thirty-six herders already contracted for by the Association; the funds will be deducted from their monthly wages.

The Basques come from Navarre, in northern Spain, where caring for sheep is a fine art. They learn English quickly, but they don't need to learn anything about the job itself. They were born knowing how to be good shepherds—because, as Mr. Embach points out, the ability is becoming extinct here. All American boys, he says, want to be gun-totin' cowboys—but too few of them have any ambition to become sheepherders.

——*Elizabeth Ward*

Danny took long steps, swinging the suitcase

THE BIG ROAD

By Kermit Shelby

RESENTFULLY the old man's eyes studied the Big Road, hating its progress across his lands, across the sleepy hills and valleys. A dark seam of tar and gravel, it ran further than the eye could see, fading away in the autumn haze, binding country to village and village to town, lopping off miles, crowding little towns up against big towns. It stole away the peace of the hills, bringing distant horizons close and shrinking the stretch of the world. It poked long fingers into quiet places, snatching away a man's privacy.

Strange teams worked the highways, driven by strange voices, tormenting the land with shovels.

For days the sheep on the sunny slope had bleated uneasily, troubled their nostrils sensing the change. Even the squirrels stopped storing their acorns in the giant oak above the gap and cocked their heads

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WALKING AROUND TROUBLE is no good, Danny learned—a real man had to meet it head-on. . . .

in wonder. Old Rip, the cur hound, sniffed the disturbed air belligerently, hackling the short fur along his spine, walking with springs in his back legs. And the old man's rage flared, untrammeled.

"This fuss keeps up, cows will be giving bloody milk." The old man spat amber on a mullen stalk, dying its silver fur dark brown. "Cows can't graze in the lanes no more. Too dangerous. One of these pretty automobiles might get unprettied."

Young Danny Moss looked up from the wire-stretchers in his hands, his mild blue eyes oblivious to the old man's mutterings. Danny, oldest son he had left, now that Mark and Jake and Newt had married off. "Pap, if we aim to have a long-time gate, looks like we could have one with hinges."

"Hinges cost money," the old man snapped. "Wire gaps good enough for Pa and Grandpap. Good enough for us, too."

"I was just a wondering," Danny said. Meekly, he drove the rusted staple in the catalpa post and stamped fresh earth around its base with his boot toe. He stood six-feet-three, taller than his father.

Shucks, with the Big Road running right by the place like this, thought Danny, a fellow could haul cream into Blue Eye in no time. Go see his girl too, if he had one. The well rope creaked and Danny looked quickly toward the house, a hundred yards or so away in the grove. The red dress moved swiftly toward the log kitchen, disappearing inside.

Danny could smell the pie baking, clear out here. He made short work of the remaining staples, straightened, and said, "If we aim to start stretching that back row, I'd best get us a jug of drinking water."

"What's wrong with spring water to drink?" the old man called. But Danny was already taking quick steps toward the house.

The old man grunted. Red skirts and a hank of hair. Hadn't fooled him none. Foolishment it was, anyhow, hiring a girl just because Ma broke her hip on that icy step, last freeze spell. March, that was. Half a year wasted. Half a year's expense. Well, he couldn't be paying for hired girls and fences too, he'd told Ma. So the girl was packing her duds tonight. Ought to a done it sooner. Didn't aim to have Danny marrying off and leaving him, like the others. Danny had to take care of him and Ma. Time for gallavatin' later, after him and Ma was gone. Hell, Danny would get the homeplace, wouldn't he? Let him earn it.

Danny stopped at the well and drew a pail of water. He had to go to the smokehouse to get the empty jug. He paused at the open kitchen door, sniffing just like Old Rip. "Smells like pie," Danny said. He edged closer.

Iris Still looked up from the dough board. "Blackberry." She had gray unsmiling eyes and steady hands.

"On Tuesday?" Danny said. "Somebody's birthday?"

Iris glanced through the window in the direction of the gap. "He hasn't told you yet?" To the blank look in Danny's eyes, she added, "Farewell supper. I'm leaving tonight."

"Leaving!" Danny dropped the jug's corncob stopper. "But—" His eyes hardened. "Pa's doings. What did he say to you?"

"Nothing much." She was very busy just then. She had to look at the pie. She fed wood to the firebox. She adjusted the stovepipe damper. Then she looked straight at Danny. "You can walk me home, if you want?"

"After supper, then." Soberly, Danny filled the jug at the well. Pap knew. All this time Pap knew and he hadn't said a word. Playing God, he was. Moving folks about like checkers. Asking nobody.

DANNY walked back and said to Pap, first thing, "I want Doll and the jig tonight." He said it like a threat.

"If you figure to go gallavantin'," the old man said, "you got another think coming. The Big Road brought her here. The Big Road can take her away.".

"It's your horse." Danny looked at the

Big Road, speculative. "Walking ain't all took up yet."

"You get her offen your mind, son," the old man said. "You get her offen your mind, you hear?"

The way Danny laughed when he picked up the wire-stretchers, the old man figured maybe things were further along than he had expected. . . .

As Danny's footsteps passed the well on his way back to the gap, a chair moved across the rough board floor in the room adjoining. Listening, Iris walked through the dog trot that connected the two log rooms. "Did you want something, Mrs. Moss?"

Danny's mother looked up from the sea of quilt pieces around her sewing rocker. She was a small-boned woman with neat silver hair and a birdlike face. "I'll get the hang of it after a while," she said, glancing down at the ladder-back chair with the pillow in it. She wished Pa wasn't so set against crutches. New fangled, he called 'em. She looked toward the bureau and said, "Just my thimble."

Iris brought it. Bessie Moss took it from her fingers, white with pie dough, and looked up smiling. "I'm going to miss you, Iris."

"Anything else?" Iris paused with her hand on the door, her mind on the pie in the oven.

Bessie said, "You think a heap of him, don't you?"

They looked at each other, woman to woman. Iris said, "More than that."

"Danny's a good boy," Bessie said. "Lets Pa run over him, though. The right kind of woman could put a spark in Danny."

Iris said, "What kind of spark?"

"Fighting spark."

The girl shook her head. "I'll teach that school at White Oak, like I bargained." Her tone held resignation. "I wouldn't want to cause trouble."

Bessie snipped a thread with the scissors and said, "When you love somebody, maybe it's worth a fight."

Iris looked at her steadily. She could smell the pie browning.

"When you've lived long as I have," Bessie said, "you'll learn meeting trouble ain't as bad as walking around it."

"It's not?" Iris looked at her thoughtfully, her lips parted in surprise.

"Try it," Bessie said.

Iris said, "Maybe I will." She hurried toward the kitchen.

THE STARS were just popping when Danny and Iris stepped through the gap and walked along the Big Road. Danny carried the suitcase. After they passed the sweet gum tree where the surface had hardened they climbed on top of the road, walking down its deserted middle.

"It's high up," Danny admired, watching the far-away lights of Blue Eye. "Changes the lay of things."

"Pretty," Iris said.

Crickets were just tuning up in the cowpea patch. Frogs cronked distantly. A passenger train ran through the valley, leaving its plume of smoke. They watched the plume. Sheep bells tinkled here and there. Now that the work on the road was done for the day, for a minute you could imagine everything was just like it used to be before the Big Road came. Only it wasn't.

"Pap wouldn't touch your pie," Danny said, apologetic.

"I noticed," Iris said.

"He thinks pie wastes sugar." Danny kicked a tiny pebble, hearing it whisper in the weeds. "You and Ma are a puzzle for sure."

"How?"

"You don't ever let Pap's meanness get you down."

Iris said, "Maybe we don't show it."

"When I feel something it's bound to come out." Danny stole a glance at her. With the night folding soft about her slimness, she looked sweeter than a sorghum keg. "How do you keep it from showing?"

"Women learn such things."

The suitcase handle creaked. "Women are the beatinest." Danny's voice was full of pleased wonder. "Take Ma, now. She just moves in a path of sunlight. Her path. Pap clouds up all over everything but his

cloud never seems to touch her. She stays happy anyway."

"She's learned a different way from me," Iris said. "I learned my way from Grandpa Oakes."

"What way is that?"

"Grandpa says when trouble tries to mow him down, he just keeps looking it in the face like it was a strange bug or something. Pretty soon the bug crawls off and hides, ashamed of itself."

"Guess he never tried treating Pap like a bug."

"If you keep watching him next time he takes a tantrum," Iris said, "just watching without feeling anything much or getting mad about it, it takes your mind off how mad you are. And it makes him feel silly to boot."

"I'll have to try that." Danny laughed. Little quavers ran through the laugh. "Only thing, I'm a feeler, like Pap is. Our whole family is feelers—excepting Ma. Ma just walks high on her own path, like this road here, and trouble and feeling can't touch her."

"She said something that set me to studying, your ma did."

"What?"

"She said meeting trouble's not so bad as walking around it. Like as if you're scared to look at it, maybe."

"I'm scared of Pap," Danny admitted. "You know why?" The headlights of an approaching automobile blinded them, then swished past, leaving darkness to close in like water does after you jump. "When I was little," Danny said, "Pap conquered me."

"Conquered you?"

"He was giving me a lamming with a peach-tree switch. I didn't want to cry. Pap said unless I cried, he'd use up every peach tree in our orchard." Danny laughed, shakily again. "He conquered me. To this day, every time Pap starts getting mad, all I can see is all them peach tree switches."

"Babyhood ghosts," Iris said. "You're a man now."

"Am I?" Danny sounded wistful.

"You're twenty-one."

"Last month."

SPREAD OUT far below winked a spattering of kerosene lights in Blue Eye, the village where Iris lived with her parents. Danny sounded troubled. "Doesn't look like I'm full growed up, does it?"

Iris didn't answer.

They passed a row of road shovels, whose upturned shiny bottoms caught the starlight. Danny looked down, touching the Big Road with his boot toe as if it were a person. "If I was my own man—"

"What would you do, Danny?"

He looked at her earnestly. "Get myself a job on the road. I could have my own team in no time. After I got me a team—" Danny's voice pulled away, sounding tired. "But I'm a white liver. I'm scared of Pap and peach-tree switches."

"No you're not!" He had never heard such fierceness as came out of Iris' voice, which ordinarily was so quiet. "Danny—kiss me."

He stared at her as if he thought she were playing jokes on him.

"Kiss me, Danny."

Danny let the suitcase drop. He took her in his arms, and all those stars overhead looked like a merry-go-round. Her lips were warm and soft, flavored with a fragrance a man could feel rather than taste. Danny inhaled their fragrance, and it did something to him. It changed him.

Iris trembled in his arms. They kissed again. She shut her eyes, quiet. "Stand up to him, Danny," she said.

"I'm going to." This was a man talking.

Danny picked up the suitcase, feeling different. It didn't take long, growing up didn't. You just stepped across a little line and there it was. As you stepped you faced squarely whatever it was that lay ahead.

Danny took long steps. The suitcase felt just like air. Danny swung it blithely. Babyhood ghosts. He wondered now why he had ever been so scared of Pap. . . .

Next morning at breakfast the old man was sullen. During the night someone had left the gap open and a number of sheep had escaped. The old man tried to lay the blame on Danny.

"But Pap, I wired that gap careful when I left. It was standing open when I got home last night."

"Gallavantin'," the old man said quick and harsh.

Bessie looked up from the coffee pot. "Why don't you tell him the truth, Will?"

"You keep your lip out of this."

Bessie said calmly, "Sure the sheep got out. Your Pa cussed the Big Road boss offen the place when he rode in here last night to offer both of you road work. He probably left it open out of spite."

The old man glared at Bessie and shoved his plate back. Bessie's look never wavered. The old man stalked out of the room like a sulky child. Danny figured now would be as good a time to tell him as any.

"Pap," Danny said, following. "You have to know it sometime. I'm leaving you."

The old man stopped in his tracks. "No you're not," he roared. "You're taking care of me and your ma, you hear?"

Danny repeated the words sternly. "I'm a leaving you. Going to take that job on the road."

"I'll garnishee your wages, too."

"You can't," Danny reminded him. "I'm twenty-one."

The old man's face went gray. He walked toward the blacksnake whip hanging on the back porch and took it off the nail. Danny's eyes watched every move.

"You and that red dress," Pap said. "You're getting too big for your britches."

"Don't give me no trouble, Pap." Danny's voice quavered.

The old man came on. For a moment the blacksnake whip in his hand became a peach-tree switch and Danny was five years old again. If you keep watching him like a bug, Iris had said. Babyhood ghosts, Danny remembered.

That's all ailed him.

As the old man's arm lifted, Danny darted in and grabbed him. He was pretty strong, even yet. They struggled backward into the yard. Old Rip leaped, yelping as if hornets were after him, and ran under the house.

Bessie scooted her chair to the door.

DANNY'S fingers closed over Pap's right wrist. With all the strength he had, Danny wrenched the arm behind the old man's back, turning sharply. The old man's face went insane with rage. Holding on to the wrist, Danny brought it up and up.

Pap's breathing was awful to hear. Danny thought surely the bone would snap. Danny gripped tighter, lifted it higher. Pap caved in at the middle and his body went limp. He slipped to his knees with Danny still holding the arm.

"You conquered me once," Danny said. "Once is enough, Pap."

The old man groaned. The whip fell to the ground. Danny picked it up.

"No sense in us acting like kids, Pap. I'm going and you can't stop me."

The old man got up slowly. He acted older. The hate in his face had melted and what Danny was seeing there was an old man, pitifully afraid. Not afraid of his son, for Danny made no move to harm him further. Afraid of old age. Afraid of all those lonely years ahead for him and Ma.

Danny hung the whip back on the nail and the old man's eyes followed him. Pleadingly, now. Danny steeled himself against that look and went and packed his clothes.

"Your clean sox are in the bureau drawer," Bessie said, just as though it were a Saturday and he was fixing to haul the cream in to Blue Eye.

Danny tied the sox and clean underwear in the blue jumper and swung the bundle across his shoulder. His eyes misted till he couldn't see a thing. Didn't seem like he had ought to do it, leaving Ma like this and no hired girl, just her and pa.

Bessie made a small sound in her throat. "Danny, I want you to write me."

"I'll write you."

He stood there, memorizing Ma's face. All those little lines. The blue of her eyes. The way her hair rolled back, soft and silver clean.

Lightly, Danny's fingertips touched her shoulder. "I hate to walk out on you, Ma."

"Time brings change," Bessie said. "Pa thinks he can hold time still with his own

two hands. But it's too big for him. Change don't fit itself to humans. Humans have to fit theirselves to change. It's like the Big Road yonder, going on and on." She gave him a look he would never forget. "Don't feel bad, Danny. You have to make your own path in this world. I hope it'll have more sunshine on it than some has."

"You make your own sunshine, Ma," Danny said. "I'll try to remember how you done it."

Bessie scooted her chair a little closer. "Good-by, Danny."

"Good-by, Ma."

Old Rip looked at him reproachfully as he walked toward the gap. Danny looked up the Big Road. Glistening with the dew of early morning, it looked very long.

"Looks like some of your sheep up yonder by that sweet gum, Pap," Danny said. "I'll turn 'em this way as I go past."

The old man looked at him. He rubbed his wrist, saying never a word.

Danny walked up the Big Road with the bundle on his shoulder. He knew just how it all looked, what he was leaving. Old Rip standing there, wondering. And Pap. And Bessie, watching from her chair in the kitchen door. That's exactly how he would remember it in the years to come. It would be best, Danny figured, if he didn't look back.

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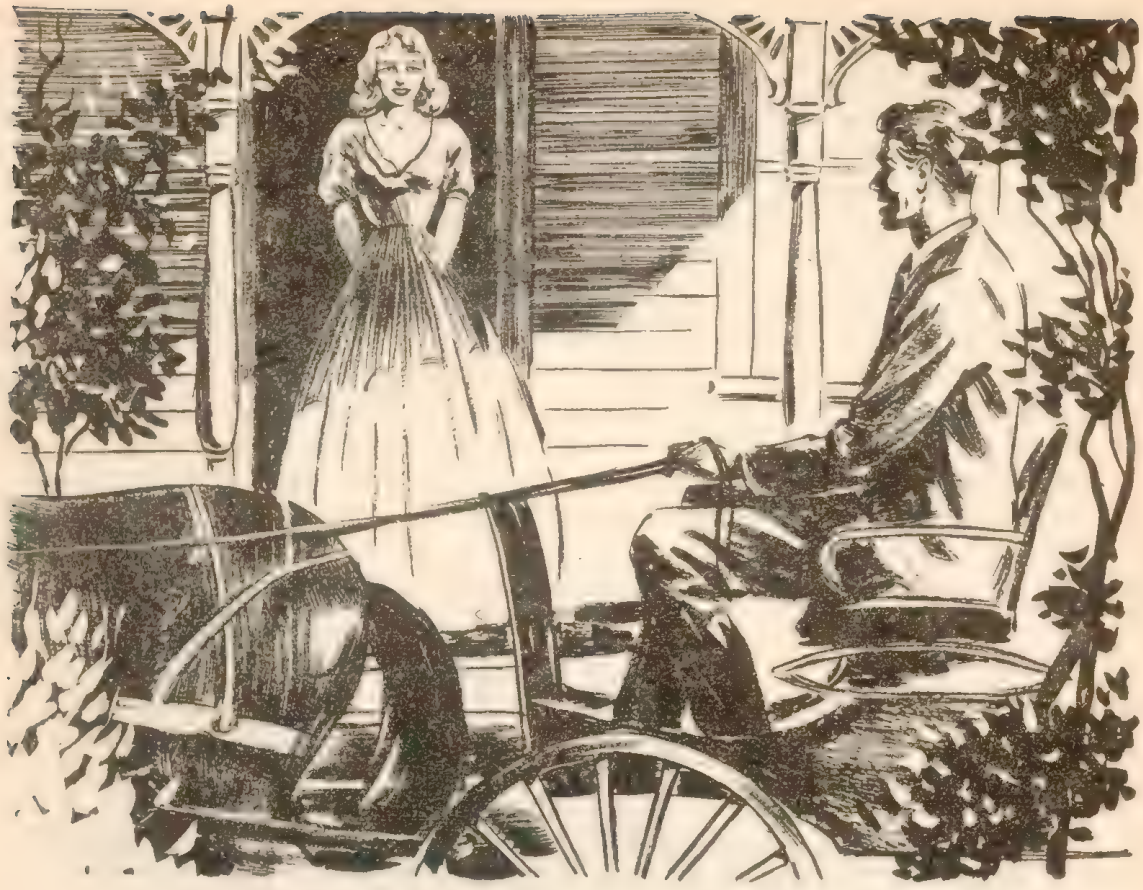

She looked prettier than I'd ever seen her

Trouble from Texas

By Dan Kirby

IT WAS on a Saturday that Logan Kane rode into Jackson. I was standing just outside the door of the bank, talking with Judith Mallory, whose dad ran the feed and seed store down the street. Kane had just come out of Blue's stable and he was moving down the board walk toward the bank. He was a tall, loose-jointed man, clean-shaven and leather-lean, and burned dark by the hot Montana winds.

He pulled up at the bank and looked briefly at the sign on the window, then started inside. His eyes touched on Judith and then on me as he was passing, and they were the coldest blue eyes I had ever looked into. Close up like that, I could see that the hair around his temples was jet-black and his smooth face sharply planed. I judged him to be a man in his late twenties.

He walked on back to the teller's cage,

IF CHERRY hadn't been involved with the wrong man, this story would never have happened. . . .

and I heard him ask for Wes Haggerty. I saw Ralph Winson, the teller, incline his head in my direction and I said so long to Judith and went inside. Never liked leaving a pretty girl, but business was business.

He had started toward me, but stopped when he saw me coming. I nodded to him and said, "I'm Wes Haggerty. Did you want to see me?"

He looked at me, unsmiling, and finally stretched out his hand and said, "I'm Logan Kane, of the Stockgrowers Association. I was told to look you up." I shook hands with him, conscious of the tremendous strength and vitality in the man's grip. Not that he was overdoing it; it was something you seemed to sense, rather than feel.

I said, "We can talk better over a cigar," and led the way into the office where I holed up when I had work I had to do.

You would have had to know how it was up here in Montana in 1885 to have understood a man like Logan Kane. Nobody had ever heard of him until Granville Stuart's men rode down into the Missouri River badlands last year to clean out the outlaws and rustlers who had taken over.

Stuart's Stranglers, they called those men, and there were some pretty hard things said about them after the bloody business was over. But the fact is that they saved the range for the cowmen, and it was with them that Kane got his rep. The story was he'd taken a bullet in the shoulder at Rocky Point when Granville's men closed in on the badlands bunch, and he was heading back to Lewistown by himself when he accidentally stumbled on to Tot Faraday and two other gunslicks. When the shooting was over, Logan had another bullet in him, but he also had himself three dead rustlers.

After the badlands bunch was broken up Logan Kane got himself a job with the Stockgrowers Association as an investigator, and that's why he'd come to Jackson. We'd had quite a number of settlers coming in on Wild Rose Creek under the Desert Land Act during the past year, and every time one came in, he'd strung himself a square mile of barbed wire around his claim. Finally it got to where Max Kelly couldn't get his Rafter K herd down to the creek at all.

TROUBLE had started then. Just little things at first, but they kept snowballing until the morning Kelly found nine of his prime two-year-olds in Tom Sully's cornfield, shot through the head. Kelly rode over to Sully's and beat hell out of him, and that's when I called in the Association. I owned the bank in Jackson and I had money out to Kelly and the settlers both, so I knew if any bad trouble broke out I'd lose either way it went.

After Kane and I had gotten settled in my office and visited for a while, he listened carefully as I told him all I knew about the trouble on the creek. I don't think he took his eyes off me until I finished. Then he pushed back his chair and stood up, figuring he'd pumped me dry. There was a knock on the door and I called, "Come in." The door opened and Cherry Halliday stood there.

Cherry had taken up a claim on the creek about three months ago, and I don't mind admitting that from the time I first saw her I had been working overtime finding business that took me out that way. She wasn't beautiful in the way you think of women being beautiful, but she had a figure that any woman would have been proud of, and there was a wholesome, outdoor look about her that went well with her softly tanned face and dark eyes.

She was wearing levis and a checkered shirt and her wide-brimmed gray stetson was pulled back off her head and hung there by the chin strap, so that it formed a sort of frame for her dark hair. She hesitated at the door, looking a little embarrassed when she saw Kane.

She said, "I can come back later, Wes."

Logan Kane looked at her and his hand automatically removed his hat. He said, "I was just leaving, ma'am."

I laughed. "Wait a minute, both of you. Kane, you might just as well start getting acquainted here." I moved over to the door and took Cherry's arm and moved her up closer to the desk. "Miss Halliday," I said, "meet Mr. Kane. He's the man the Asso-

ciation has sent down to try to help us work out this trouble on the creek."

Kane said, "I'm sorry, what was the name?"

Cherry smiled at him and said, "Halliday, Mr. Kane. Cherry Halliday." She turned to me and added shyly, "Wes, I just stopped by to let you know you've talked me into that dance tonight."

I grinned like a kid in a candy store. "That's what I wanted to hear," I said. "I'll come by for you at seven."

Cherry turned to go, then looked back over her shoulder. "Mr. Kane, the farmers are having a dance at the schoolhouse on Wild Rose Creek tonight. Do you fancy yourself as a dancing man?"

There was just an edge of banter in her voice, and it surprised me because Cherry had always been rather reserved. But if Kane noticed it he didn't let on.

He said quietly, "I never had time to learn, ma'am." He added, "I'll be there, though. I want to talk to the farmers and it'll save me the trouble of catching them one at a time."

Cherry waved me good-by and went out and Kane waited a moment, then started for the door.

I followed him out, still thinking of Cherry. "You know, she's a spunky girl, Kane. Came up all the way from Missouri and took up a claim by herself."

Kane just nodded, and I wondered if he'd really heard me. "I want to see if Max Kelly is in town," he said. "I'd like to get the straight of this business from both sides."

I said, "If he's here, he'll be at the Lady Gay Saloon or Kressler's general store. I'll go with you."

WE WERE angling across the street toward the saloon, when Kane said quietly, "Haggerty, get away from me."

I thought I'd heard wrong. I looked at him, and his face was as hard as gray granite. He said, "Do it, man!" I fell back and let him move on and it was then I saw the thin, slope-shouldered puncher weaving across the street away from the saloon. He was coming at an angle so that he headed straight for Kane and he looked like he'd been on a sure enough high lonesome.

Kane was walking unhurriedly, with an easy coolness that made me wonder again at his purpose in telling me to get away. But just as the thin puncher was about to pass Kane, he stopped and muttered something, and he didn't look like a drunk any more.

The thin man's hand fell to the gun on his thigh and he drew with a swift, graceful motion. Watching him, I knew that Kane would not be able to spot him the edge he had, and beat him.

But Kane had half turned as the man spoke and when he twisted around to face the man, his elbow jabbed out in a short, vicious blow that caught the thin man on the neck and dropped him hard. The man's gun fired as he was falling.

Kane was on him then, kicking the gun out of his hand and hauling him to his feet. Kane held the man with one hand and drew his own gun with the other and I saw the pistol rise and fall in a sharp, slashing blow that crashed against the man's temple. The man fell to his knees, blood streaming down his face, and he looked at Kane with dazed eyes.

Kane said, "Tell the man who hired you to try it himself next time." And he walked on toward the saloon, leaving the man sitting there in the street.

A little crowd began to gather around the fallen man, and looking up I saw Cherry Halliday staring at Kane. I couldn't read the emotion on her face.

I caught up with Kane on the porch of the saloon. I said, "How did you know he'd—"

"He followed me out of Miles City," Kane said quietly. "I spotted him."

A man moved out of the batwings, almost bumping into us, just as we were starting in. He was a tall, blond man, almost as tall as Kane and some heavier. He had the marks of a range dandy on him, with his soft wool shirt and hand-stitched boots. Even his gunbelts were trimmed in white leather lacing. He looked, however, as if he could use those guns.

Kane's face froze when he saw the man. He said, "We missed you in the badlands last year, Jim."

The blond man's eyes were cool on Kane. "You didn't miss me, Kane. I wasn't there. I was down in Indian Territory. You ain't got a thing on me and you know it."

Kane said, "Maybe my luck will turn, Jim," and he pushed on into the saloon.

We looked around for Kelly but when he wasn't there we walked back out on the porch of the saloon, thinking we might spot him on the street.

I said, "Who was that blond fellow, Kane? I've seen him around town before, somewhere."

"Jim Dolly, he calls himself," Logan said. "We looked for that lobo a solid month in the badlands last year but he slipped us."

I told Kane I had to get back to the bank and he said he reckoned he'd look around a little, and would see me tonight at the schoolhouse dance.

I LEFT the bank a little early and hired a surrey and was out to pick up Cherry at seven o'clock. Her place lay on a bend in Wild Rose Creek, and it was a pretty spot with the water running wide and fairly deep, and big box elders shading the banks. She'd had a two-room cabin built and a small barn and stable, but she hadn't done anything with her ground yet. For that matter, there wasn't much one girl could do to put a whole section under irrigation. I had tried to lend her money to hire help, but she wouldn't take it.

She met me on the porch, and she looked prettier than I had ever seen her. She was wearing a blue dress with white lace at the throat, and I realized it was the first time I'd ever seen her in anything except levis and shirt.

She seemed a little withdrawn on the ride over to the schoolhouse and I had my hands full trying to keep the conversation going. Once when it lagged she said, "Where's Mr. Kane?" and I told her he was doing some checking around town.

She said, "He's a hard man, isn't he, Wes?"

I nodded. "I guess you have to be hard in his business. I wouldn't want him after me."

We got to the schoolhouse about eight. Tom Sully was standing outside talking with Arthur King and Jeff Winters and his wife, and I could hear the rest of them inside the school. Mrs. Winters came up, beaming, and put her arm around Cherry and they walked off and left us men alone.

I said, "Well, Tom, how is it with you?"

He dropped a cigarette to the ground and mashed it under a heel. "All right," he said. "I'm getting along all right."

Jeff Winters said dryly. "Everything's all right, he says. Hell, Max Kelly's crew just tore down half his fence along the creek last night."

King looked at Winters. "Maybe Sully doesn't want his troubles aired in front of the man he owes money to, Jeff."

I said, "I don't want any of you to feel that way. I've got so much tied up on the creek now I'd have to stay behind you, whether I thought it was a good risk or not. The only way I can help is to know what's going on. I've already got an Association man down here."

I hadn't more than got the words out when Kane rode up. He had changed his shirt and his boots were polished, but he still wore the .45. I could see the stock of a saddlegun sticking up just over his roan's shoulder.

I introduced him to the boys standing there and he talked with them a little, but he didn't really go after any information, which surprised me some. About all he did was ask Sully if he shot Kelly's cows and Sully said he hadn't.

He seemed anxious to get away from us and pretty soon he mumbled something about being thirsty and walked off toward the schoolhouse. We stood there and talked for a while longer, and when we heard Ed Sciler's fiddle peel off the first note we all went inside the schoolhouse.

I tried to find Cherry and claim the first dance and I was sort of mad when I saw Kane dancing with her. He wasn't doing a very good job, but Cherry was smiling up at him, and for the first time since I'd

seen him he was smiling, too. I got trapped into dancing with Judith Mallory, and it was three dances later before I could break away and cut in on Logan Kane.

I said, "For a man who never had time to learn, Kane, you catch on pretty fast."

CHERRY laughed. "Detectives have to be smarter than other people, don't they, Mr. Kane?" She was looking square at him, and there was something in her eyes beside humor. It was as if she was mocking him, and I remembered how she'd talked to him in the bank that morning in much the same way. I wondered what it was about him that brought that out in her.

Kane regarded her gravely. "It helps," he said, and moved off into the crowd. He must have left right away because I didn't see him again that night. I wondered what had changed his mind about talking to the farmers.

I remarked to Cherry about his leaving like that, but she made a face and said, "Let's talk about pleasanter things, Wes." But her eyes looked worried and two or three times I noticed her watching the door, and I thought her laughter and conversation seemed a little forced.

It was late that night when I drove her home. I wanted to kiss her goodnight more than I'd ever wanted anything in my life, but I didn't. I helped her out of the surrey and up to the porch of her cabin.

I said, "Cherry, may I call again on Wednesday? These evenings are nice and that trail along the creek would be fine in a surrey."

She smiled. "Are you sorry for me because I'm all alone and have to make my own way?" Before I could answer she said, "I didn't mean that, Wes. I'm not myself tonight." She looked at me again. "About the ride—I'll be away all next week. Some friends from home have settled near Lewistown and I promised to visit them."

Cherry dropped by the bank the next morning and I saw her off on the stage. I promised her I would get Joe Blue's boy over at the stable to drive her team home. She said Arthur Kink had promised to drop over every day and tend her stock. I stood there watching the stage disappear in its own dust, and wondered how long it would take me to get up gumption enough to ask Cherry to marry me.

I didn't see Logan Kane that day or the next, but Wednesday morning just as I was getting out of bed I heard a rider pull up in my yard. I went to the door and saw a kid jumping off a gaunted black pony.

He come up to the door at a trot and then hauled up when he saw me standing there. He said, "You Wes Haggerty?" and when I said I was, he handed me an envelope.

"Rode all night to give you this." I reached into my pocket for a dollar but the kid shook his head. "I been paid," he said, and walked back to his pony.

I thought it might be from Cherry, though I couldn't imagine what the urgency was. But when I opened it I saw it was a man's writing. The message was from Kane, and it said he wanted me to meet him at Bates by ten o'clock the next morning. He said it was important. Bates was a little settlement on the mouth of the Musselshell near the badlands, and it was a good forty miles. I wondered what he was doing way off up there and what he wanted with me, but there was nothing in the message to answer my questions.

He said it was important, and he didn't seem to be a man to exaggerate, so I told Ralph to take over at the bank and I rented me a horse and left. I stopped for the evening at Ray Meadow's ranch, about fifteen miles south of Bates, and left early the next morning with a fresh horse. I got into Bates a little after ten o'clock and Kane was waiting for me. He looked rough and worn out, and I guessed he hadn't slept or shaved since I'd seen him last.

WHAT'S all this about?" I asked him. He said, "I'll show you pretty quick now." We got fresh horses at Bates and he took off toward the badlands with me following him, but he wouldn't talk except in monosyllables so I stopped pumping him.

Once, though, when I told him Cherry

was gone to Lewistown for the week, he looked at me levelly. I saw that his face was sort of relaxed and his eyes had a peculiar far-away look in them.

He said, "Wes, you're in love with her, aren't you?"

I nodded. "I am, Kane."

We were into some real mean country now, broken, gutted land that rose and fell in a jagged, crazy pattern. Kane turned off down a dry wash and finally pulled up and dismounted. He reached inside his warbag and pulled out a pair of field glasses.

He said, "We've got to get up there on the rim, Wes." He nodded toward the steep, weather-cracked face of the red butte that towered up some hundred yards away. We climbed up to the top, and from there you could barely see the Musselshell shimmering under the noon sun. There was a haze in the air near the river, and you could just make out the cattle strung out down there.

Kane was watching the herd through the glasses. He said, "That's a trail herd, Wes, up from Indian Territory. President Cleveland closed the range down there about three months ago, and there's a quarter million Texas cattle hunting for a home. That's part of them."

There was a kind of strange eagerness in his face now, and he rolled a cigarette and lighted it and drew the smoke deep into his lungs.

He said, "There's been three herds moved up so far. Two of them crossed the Milk River, where there's still plenty of grass, but they'll have trouble making a winter up there. The Association's been watching these herds just in case they try to squeeze in on the range down here. This one they lost. It was heading north toward the Milk River, too, but doubled back and holed up in the badlands. I ran across it Tuesday."

His talk wasn't making much sense to me. He was supposed to be investigating the trouble on Wild Rose Creek, not galavanting off after Texas trail herds. I told him so.

He handed me the glasses. "Take a look, Wes. You see anybody you know?"

There was something in his voice that sent a chill through me. I raised the glasses and swept the herd slowly. There was a rider up on the point that looked familiar, and I was studying him when the horse half wheeled so that the rider was facing me.

I almost dropped the glasses. "My God, Kane," I whispered, "that's Cherry Halliday."

Kane nodded and pinched out his smoke. His face was a cold mask. He said, "Cherry Arnold, Wes, not Halliday. She's the owner of that herd."

I was completely lost then. I said, "Maybe you better tell me about it. I'm tired of guessing."

HE SAID, "I aimed to. I just wanted you to see this for yourself so you'd believe me." He paused and his eyes took on that far-away look. "I got on to her when I first met her in your office, Wes. Before I started on this job, I checked over the entry applications at the land office in Miles City to get a line on the farmers, their names, and where they were from. I noticed this entry by Cherry Arnold, from Owl Springs, Texas, and then you introduced me to Cherry Halliday and told me she came from Missouri.

"I figured it had to be the same person," Logan continued, "and wondered why she had changed her name. I asked the Association to check on Cherry Arnold and they sent a telegram to Owl Springs. Just routine stuff, but it paid off."

He paused and looked at me. "She was afraid to file her application under a false name because her claim could be canceled. But she was also afraid to use her real name around here, for fear someone passing through who had known her in Texas would give her scheme away.

"You see, her dad was old Cap Arnold. At one time, he had one of the biggest herds in Texas, the Diamond A brand." Logan's voice was stern and deliberate. "He lost some grass to his neighbors in a range war and lost more in a court fight. He was almost broke when he died. Cherry took what was left of the herd to Indian Territory, and before she'd been there a

year the government closed the range.

"She must have met Jim Dolly down there and he talked her into this Montana country. She was pretty smart in some ways, Wes. She had herself a mile of water for the herd, and she and Dolly figured the farmers could be used to drive Kelly off his range and pave the way for her cows."

I couldn't believe him. I said, "You got no proof of all this, Kane. For all you know she never saw Jim Dolly in her life."

Kane smiled wryly. "She saw him right after you took her home from the dance, Wes. I was watching Kelly's spread and I saw Dolly leave. I followed him to Cherry's place." He stood up. "Wes, I'm going to stop this herd where it is. Do you want to go back to Jackson?"

I shook my head dumbly. "I'll see it through, Kane."

He nodded and started back to the horses, and I followed him, still trying to piece together the threads of what he'd told me.

I didn't know what Kane had in mind but I was surprised and some scared when he started riding right out to meet the big Texas herd.

Cherry saw us first, and she rode off from the herd and then stopped, facing us. I could see the defiance in her eyes as she recognized us. But she was a little frightened, I think.

She looked at me, but it was Kane she was speaking to when she said, "Well, the detective has been working."

Kane's face was expressionless. He looked past her toward the herd. "Are those the friends from home you had to visit?"

She flushed. "I came out here to tell my men to turn the herd north, Kane. I couldn't go through with it. I knew you were on to me, anyway." She seemed very small and very lonely there on the big gray gelding, facing Kane.

She noticed me looking at her, and she smiled. "I guess you hate me now, Wes?"

I shook my head. "No, Cherry. We stopped this before anyone was badly hurt. I'm just glad it's over."

Kane said, "It isn't over yet, Wes." He looked at Cherry. "What was Dolly getting out of this?"

She said, "Half the herd. I sent one of my men in to Jackson yesterday to tell him I was going north with my half, and for him to pull out of Jackson and meet me here."

Kane stiffened. "You little fool!" he said savagely. "Did you think that would stop Dolly? He'll have the whole herd and you, too, before this is over, if he has his way."

KANE LOOKED at Cherry with anger in his eyes, but there was something else there too. He said, "How many men does Dolly have?"

Cherry's face was white now. She looked like a scared kid. "The two in town with him, Kane. One of them is the man you pistol-whipped. Just those three have been causing all the trouble on the creek, but Dolly said he would get more men for the big drive to finish shoving Kelly off the range, if the nesters didn't do it. My men were to stay clear until the fighting was over."

"How did Dolly aim to start the showdown between Kelly and the nesters?" Kane's voice was harsh.

Cherry's eyes wavered. "Dolly was to blow up Kelly's spring at Chalk Butte and make it look as though Tom Sully did it."

Kane looked at me. "I've got to get to Jackson, Wes. Dolly will start a full-scale war between those farmers and Kelly as soon as he finds out Cherry is going north. He's got to move fast and he'll know it."

Some of the urgency in the man seeped into me. I began to get the picture now. Dolly would go ahead with his plans on the creek. He knew he could catch this herd any time he wanted. He knew, too, that Cherry would do what he said or face a murder charge. There would be some killings on the creek now, and Cherry was the boss according to the record. She would take the blame.

I said, "Let's go, Kane. I'm with you."

We rode all night. I was so tired of the saddle I thought I'd fall out, but Kane kept urging us on, and the energy and relentless drive of the man made me ashamed, so that I stuck it out. Cherry had stayed with the herd and was turning them north.

Once on the ride Kane said, "You can't

blame her much, Wes. She's been raised with cattle and cowmen all her life. Fighting for grass is nothing new to her. It's just part of the cow business."

I said, "You think she really intended to quit?"

He nodded. "Why else would she have come out to the herd? It would have been an ugly business, Wes. I doubt that she knew how rough Jim Dolly could get when she made her deal with him."

We got into Jackson the next morning and rode up to Blue's stable, and I was posed. It also came to me why Kane was protecting her. You forget that even men like Kane sometimes fall in love.

I watched him go into the Lady Gay and saw him come out again and stand on the porch of the saloon, his eyes covering the street.

He looked cool and easy there, as if he didn't much give a damn. He had just started down the steps when I saw Jim Dolly come out of Pride's Café, with two men flanking him. One of them was the thin man that had drawn on Kane the first day

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sure Kane would have to stop for a while. There had to be a limit to even his endurance.

But he didn't stop. He walked out on the board walk, drew his gun and checked it carefully, and then looked at me. "It's my show from here on out, Wes. You stay clear of it. If I don't stop Dolly, then you get out to the farmers and over to Kelly's and tell them to get ready because they're going to catch hell."

I said, "For God's sake—you aren't going to take on three of them? We could get a U.S. Marshal down here."

He grinned through cracked lips. "Could we, Wes?" And it came to me then that if the law got in on this, Cherry would be exhe hit town. The other was a stocky, redfaced man I didn't know.

LOGAN KANE saw them as they came out, and almost at the same time Dolly spotted Kane. The two men faced each other across the street, and I saw the thin puncher move off to one side, watching Kane warily.

Kane walked down the steps of the saloon and moved deliberately out into the street toward Dolly. He said, "I guess I better finish what Stuart's men started last year, Jim."

Dolly laughed thinly. "I've missed you, Kane. I was afraid you'd ran out on me."

Dolly moved then. His hands fell to the

two guns on his thighs. He was fast—even faster than the thin man who had started his draw along with Dolly's. But not as fast as Kane.

There was a lot of killer in Kane that day. His lips skinned back over his teeth in an ugly snarl and his .45 was somehow in his hand. His first shot took Dolly high and smashed him back into the side of the café, and his second caught the thin puncher square in the middle and the man sat down slowly, his arms around his stomach while death glazed his eyes.

Dolly wasn't down though, and he squeezed off a shot that took Kane in the side, jerking him off balance.

I don't remember doing it, but I must have run into Blue's and got my saddlegun when Dolly and his men first came out of the café. I hadn't even got it to my shoulder during the time it took Kane to hit Dolly and kill the thin man. But I was ready now, and I lined the red-faced man up in my sights, just as he was leveling down on Kane, and my shot caught him in the throat and he sort of sighed and grabbed his neck and died there on his feet.

Kane was moving toward Dolly again. There was a red stain on his shirt from the flesh wound, and a kind of unholy joy in his eyes. "Jim," he said mildly, "take this to hell with you." And he fired again. Dolly's body stiffened and then relaxed, and he slid down the side of the café.

I guess the whole thing didn't last a minute, but to me it seemed like forever. It was quiet now, and people were coming out of the stores and gathering around the dead outlaws lying there in the street.

I propped my gun against Blue's stable and started for Kane, and it was then I noticed her. She was running down the street toward him. She hadn't stayed with the herd. She had ridden all night, too. There was a cry in her voice when she called his name.

I heard him say, "You're supposed to be moving that herd north."

And she stopped in front of him and I was close enough so that I could see the tears in her eyes. "I need more help, Kane."

I guess it came to him then because his face turned pale and he didn't look like a killer any more. Just a tired, bone-weary man who has just had something happen to him he couldn't quite believe.

He said huskily, "You want me?"

She tried to smile through the tears, and the old banter that was always in her voice when she spoke to him was there again.

She said, "When a trail boss is caught shorthanded, Kane, he takes anything."

I watched them walk into Blue's stable, and then I saw them ride out. Cherry looked back once and waved to me, and I waved back, and stood there watching them fade away on the trail.

The town seemed almost peaceful again. The dead men had been carried off the street, and the sun on my back made me warm and sleepy. I had already figured that I would wrangle Max Kelly a right of way down to the creek for his cattle. Those settlers would go along with whatever I said.

They would be needing me for a long time to come.

It worried me some that I could watch Cherry ride off with another man and not feel anything, and it came to me that maybe I had just been sorry for her, like she said. Anyway, it looked like true love to me.

I turned toward the bank and saw Judith Mallory standing in front of her dad's store.

She smiled at me and I walked over toward her, noticing how the wind rippled through her blonde hair.

I said, "Where have you been keeping yourself?"

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OUT OF THE CHUTES

A GOOD trick roper will always get a big hand from the rodeo fans. He can get jobs enough to keep his family eating well. He can also win a modest amount of fame.

But he'll also admit a longing for the good old days—the trick roper's heyday, when no self-respecting rodeo committee would think of putting on a show without a fancy roping contest. A rodeo without trick ropers was unthinkable.

Buffalo Bill Cody is generally credited with introducing trick roping in his famous Wild West Shows. Probably plenty of Western cowboys had whiled away a quiet afternoon experimenting with their lariats, but the first trick roper to perform in public was a Mexican, Vincent Orespo.

When he first joined Cody's show, even the performers crowded close to the arena to watch him. And the spectators could hardly believe their eyes. The things he made his rope do looked like magic, and there were always demands from the audience to examine it, to make sure it wasn't rigged up with something mysterious, like that new-fangled electricity.

Naturally, Orespo soon had plenty of imitators. It wasn't long before as many as twenty trick ropers would enter a rodeo to compete for big purses, as well as trophies, buckles and saddles.

After a while it was a case of too much of a good thing. The fans, whose eyes had popped at the sight of the first trick ropers, saw so many fancy loops and catches that they got bored. Roping had to be extra special to make them take notice—or roping had to have something added. Will Rogers was a superb rope handler, but his name would probably be known to only a few old rodeo fans if he hadn't used his wonderful gift of gab in his act too.

But there was a while when anyone who could jump through his own loop was in great demand at Western shows. And among the top-notchers, competition was terrific. They guarded their tricks as carefully as a baseball team guards its signals. They'd go into the wilds to practice, and sometimes bring along a guard to watch for prying eyes.

But sometimes no secrecy precautions worked. And sometimes two ropers would bring out the same new routine at the same time, and then each would accuse the other of having stolen it. Feuds sometimes built up to the point where two men threatened to fight it out with sixguns, but none of the threats, as far as we know, ever materialized.

There was one roper who claimed he had the dirtiest trick of all time played on him (but of course he was prejudiced). This fellow, whom we'll call Pat, was very popular with the fans, but not so with other ropers. His highly polished roping act was often followed at rodeos by a slapstick clown act. The clown, whom we'll call Mike, was a pretty fair roper himself. He had to be, in order to miss his catches in the most ridiculous way, and even to snarl himself all up in his rope.

Anyway, Pat was hard at work perfecting a dazzling new routine. He had it down cold long before he did it in public because he was saving it for an important rodeo, Tex Austin's show at Chicago.

Both Pat and Mike were appearing at a fairly big show in the Southwest, when Pat got the shock of his career. You can imagine his horror, astonishment and wrath when Mike ended his buffoon act with a brilliant performance of Pat's secret new catch.

This story got around among the other

ropers, and even though they weren't very fond of Pat, they were so appalled at Mike's treachery that they refrained from copying the new routine themselves—until the next season, anyway.

Most people agree that the top trick roper of the good old days was the late Chet Byers, and running a close second was Sam Garrett, known as the "Powder Face Kid." There was a good reason why Chet and Sam rivaled each other so closely and were both so similarly adept with their lariats.

They came from the same hometown, Mulhall, Okla. Growing up, they practiced together, and then they entered show business together as a team. Finally, it became apparent that Chet and Sam represented just too much talent for one act, and so they split up and became ardent rivals. Folks who saw them both say there wasn't much to choose between them.

But it was Chet who made the biggest name for himself, probably because he took roping more seriously than any man before or since. He claimed he never earned a penny in his whole life that he didn't earn with his rope. The first couple of bucks he put in his pocket were won at a little Oklahoma rodeo, and his last big check came from a contract performance just before he died in 1945.

He felt that the whole country ought to take roping as seriously as he did. And he thought everyone would, as soon as the joys and benefits of roping became generally known. Chet claimed that twirling a loop was the greatest pastime in the world —not only absorbing but healthful.

Roping, said Chet, would improve your figure, your digestion and your mental outlook. You could avoid ulcers, if you were a tired businessman, by trying to make a catch on the milkman's horse. You could have a figure like Clara Bow's, if you were a plump housewife, by roping your youngsters in the backyard instead of calling them in to dinner.

For a while Chet's enthusiasm for his specialty seemed to be spreading. Most youngsters tried their hand with a piece of old clothesline, and lots of them got pretty good at it. But the joys of roping just never swept the country the way Chet had hoped. Perhaps it's lucky that he didn't live to see the day when trick roping is simply an added attraction at a rodeo.

But even before Chet died he lost the title of World's Champion Roper. His right to the title had never been officially established, but it was generally accepted. Then, in 1943, a national magazine put up a purse of $2,000 for a roping match between Chet and a rising young performer named Junior Eskew.

It was agreed that the money would be split between them, but that the winner of the contest would be recognized as the champ. And then Chet backed out. Perhaps he felt that his greatest days were over, and that the title he had held for so long should not be defended—at least not against only one man.

So Junior Eskew won by default—though, of course, since there was no contest, there was no prize. Junior still claims the title, and he's willing to defend it against all comers, backing himself with a $5,000 bet.

Junior doesn't limit himself to trick roping. He's also a calf-roper and bulldogger and he loves to enter wild cow milking contests. Junior ought to be good in the arena because he's grown up in rodeo. His father is Col. Jim Eskew, the famous rodeo producer, and Junior began his career at the advanced age of four.

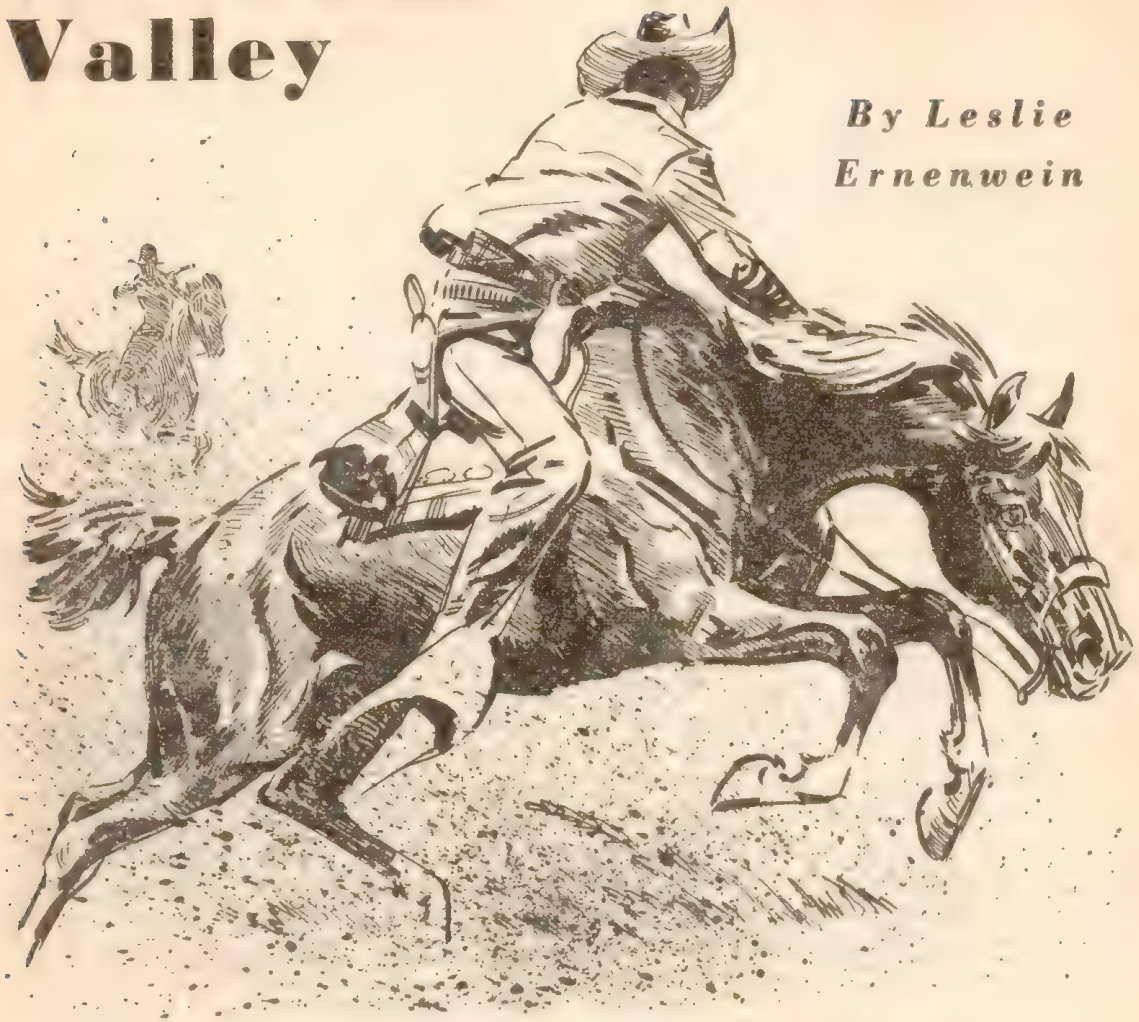
He learned to do everything in rodeo, and what's more, in his Dad's shows, he does it. He rides in the grand entry, of course, and the quadrille. He solos in a trick riding act, and later puts on his specialty, fancy roping. He enters the calf-roping and bulldogging contests. And in between he picks up broncs and hazes for the other bulldoggers.

Junior is a busy fellow, and being the World's Champion Trick Roper (nobody's willing to bet $5,000 that he *isn't*) it's no wonder he longs for the good old days when a fellow who could spin a loop didn't have to do anything else.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

Imperial Valley

By Leslie Ernenwein



Bullets whistled close as Roman spurred the bay to a run

THE STORY SO FAR:

Soon after the Colorado River floods washed out a nearly completed Imperial Development dam, Manager JOHN CHILTON dies. BEN ROMAN takes over with MOHEE JIM BRIMBERRY and engineer ANGUS MAC IVOR, determined to carry out Chilton's dream. Hoping for funds from the S.P., they construct a temporarily adequate gate with shanghaied work gangs headed by BLACK MIKE MOYNIHAN.

During this work at Pilot Knob, the new lady doctor, LEE FARNUM, whom Ben had refused to put on Imperial's payroll, shows her mettle by caring for the injured. Ben has to admire her and finally hires her to replace hard-drinking DOC SHUMWAY. But he later learns Doc Shumway hadn't shown up at Pilot Knob because of an outbreak of typhoid; he'd worked day and night, resting only when widowed Karen Borgstrom insisted.

When they return to Deseronto there's a message from the Los Angeles office ordering Ben to build a diversion over the new gate no matter what the risk to the settlers. SLIM LACEY, restaurant owner, seeing Ben with Lee Farnum, wonders what they mean to each other. . . .

PART THREE

THE WIND came out of the northwest at dawn. It whipped through Gorgonia Pass, scooping dust from the dry land and fashioning rippled patterns in the sand dunes south of Salton Sink. By ten o'clock the sun was obscured in a tawny twilight

of swirling grit that formed miniature drifts against the closed doors and tent flaps of Deseronto.

Dust sifted between warped boards and window casings; through every crack and cranny; it formed a talcum coating on the dishes Slim Lacey arranged for her noon trade. The counter was gritty with it; her eyes and nostrils irritated by an abrasive fog that wavered like tan smoke in the lamplit restaurant. But it was the wind that bothered her most, the thin, wild whine of it hour after hour. There was a loneliness in it, a sense of isolation.

She was glad when a customer came in before noon. A hardware drummer turned cranky by the storm, he complained about sand in his soup; but Slim felt better while he was at the counter. The dust-fogged lamplight seemed less weird with someone to share it.

When the drummer departed there was another interval of wind-shrilled aloneness before the door opened again and Ben Roman hustled inside.

"What a day!" he complained, rubbing grit from his eyes.

"The wind is awful," Slim said. "It makes me so nervous I could scream."

That admission surprised Ben Roman, and somehow pleased him. He reached across the counter and tweaked her chin. "Big Slim can take heat and dust and flies without a word," he teased. "But wind makes her spooky."

Slim couldn't help smiling as she poured him a cup of coffee. He was more like his old self, she thought, like the Ben Roman who had once called her his kind of woman.

"First time you've smiled in a week," Roman said. "I thought you were mad at me."

"I was," she said.

"Why?"

Slim shrugged. "No use talking about it, Ben."

"Was it because I fired Doc Shumway?"

She nodded.

"So that's it," Roman mused. Then he asked impatiently, "Can't you get it through your head that it was a thing I had to do? I felt sorry for Doc; I didn't like to fire him. But that isn't important. I've got to think of the project, and the great mass of people it will benefit later on."

"But I thought you didn't give a darn about the settlers. You always said you could like a person, but not people."

Roman shrugged. "Changed my way of thinking," he admitted.

Slim eyed him with a sober attentiveness; she asked, "Did Lee Farnum cause the change?"

"Well, she thinks the same as John Chilton, and I believe he was right."

Slim shook her head. "You never believed Chilton was right, Ben. I remember you saying once that his thinking was loco. Twisty as a sack of snakes, you called it."

Roman smiled sheepishly. "Can't a man change his mind?" he asked. Then, wanting her to understand, he said, "Look, Slim. I'm general manager of the deal. It's bigger than Doc Shumway, or Clark Hazelhurst, or Monroe's stinking newspaper. It's bigger than all of them put together. I want to keep the project going until Southern Pacific comes in with us. That's the only chance we've got—to hang on until S.P. comes in."

"But what's that got to do with Doc Shumway?" Slim asked.

Roman scowled at her. "Can't you understand what I've been trying to say?" he demanded impatiently.

"All I understood is that you've changed, Ben. And I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Because I liked Ben Roman the way he was."

Roman grinned, asked, "Much?"

"Too much, I guess. You talked tough, and you acted as if you didn't give a darn for anyone. But there was a kindness in you, Ben. It was a nice thing."

"And now, because I fired Doc Shumway, you don't like me any more?"

"It's not just that. It's because Lee Farnum has changed you."

As if talking to himself, Roman said, "So Big Slim has a jealous streak in her. She thinks I'm sweet on the lady doctor."

"Aren't you?"

Roman shook his head. He fingered the

bracelet he had given her and asked, "The man in Tucson said you were the prettiest girl in Deseronto, didn't he?"

"That was before Lee Farnum came here."

"Don't listen to Monroe," Roman warned. "He's a suspicious old woman—a reformer. I had no choice about Doc Shumway. He was drunk when we needed him at the construction camp. Hazelhurst brought Lee Farnum, and I had to give her the job."

SLIM THOUGHT for a moment before saying, "Then it wasn't just to make a place for her."

"Hell no," Roman insisted.

Presently, as Slim came from behind the counter and dusted off the stools, he asked, "Heard from your dad lately?"

"Last week. He's going to Alaska."

"Wonderful place, Alaska," Roman said enviously. "Joe is a lucky dog."

"A tramp dog," Slim said. "I'll probably never see him again."

Roman put an arm around her shoulder; he said, "Well, like I said before, you've still got me."

Slim shook her head. "The project has you, Ben. I'm just an individual who doesn't count."

Roman ignored that sarcasm; he said, "Slim," and brought her to him so abruptly that she dropped the dust cloth. The scent of her hair was like an intimate perfume for him; color stained her cheeks and some flame of emotion glowed in her eyes. She was a warmth and a fragrance in his arms; she was what a man wanted when he wanted a woman . . .

Slim's hands came against his chest with defensive pressure and her lips slid away. "No, Ben," she protested. "Someone's at the door."

She pulled free and hurriedly went behind the counter as Jim Brimberry came in.

"Why don't you knock?" Roman demanded indignantly.

"Knock?" Mohee Jim echoed.

"On the door."

"What for?"

The baffled expression on Brimberry's face made Slim laugh, but she felt sorry for him, and said, "Ben is just funning with you, Mohee."

"Job must've made him loco," Brimberry muttered and climbed onto a stool. "Storm's getting worse. Regular damned hurricane. I told Miss Farnum she shouldn't go."

"Go where?" Roman demanded.

"To Lateral Seventeen. She's got a case of typhoid fever at the Van Horn place."

Roman stared at him. "You mean to say she started for there in this storm?"

Brimberry nodded.

Roman cursed. "You shouldn't have let her go," he accused.

"Well, I tried to talk her out of it. I said it was no day for a lady to be traipsin' around in a buggy. But you know how she is. Knows it all, by God."

"How long ago did she leave?"

"Upwards of half an hour."

As Roman turned away from the counter, Slim asked, "Where you going, Ben?"

"To bring her back, if I can find her," Roman said and slammed the door behind him.

Slim went to the front window. She couldn't see Ben, or even the building across the street. Everything was hidden by an opaque haze of wind-driven dust.

"Wouldn't you think a growed woman would have more sense than to start out in a sand storm?" Brimberry grumbled. "And her a danged greenhorn to boot."

"That's why," Slim said. "She's a greenhorn."

She thought: a blond, sweet-smiling greenhorn who has her mind set on marrying Ben Roman.

"I hope he thinks to take a canteen with him," Brimberry said. "He's liable to spend the night in a sand drift."

The risk to Ben hadn't occurred to Slim. Now it did, and she said urgently, "Go with him, Mohee. Or if he's already gone, fill a canteen and follow him."

Brimberry stared at her. "Why should I buck a sandstorm just because a romantic galoot goes chasing after a fool female?"

"On account of Ben," Slim explained.

"It wouldn't be so risky, with two, if you've got water."

"But I was intending to eat," Brimberry muttered.

Slim grasped his arm. "You've got to go," she insisted, and propelled him toward the door.

As he went out she reminded him, "Don't forget the canteen."

IT TOOK Ben Roman about three minutes to saddle his bay gelding; another couple minutes to fill a canteen. The wind was at his back as he left town, but the billowing grit half blinded him. He peered at the dust-swirled road, finding no sign of travel until he came to a sand drift and glimpsed two fragile ruts.

"The darn fool!" he muttered.

But Roman understood why Lee Farnum wouldn't let a sandstorm interfere with her duty as a medico. She had to prove that a lady doctor was capable; that she could cope with anything the job involved.

Proud, he thought; proud and stubborn and ambitious. She had wanted this job, and she'd got it. She wanted a hospital and she was getting that. Roman grinned, thinking how adroitly the lady doctor had drawn Deseronto's leading citizens into her hospital project; she had even talked Lew Gallatin into contributing a hundred dollars toward the fund. . . .

Alternately loping and trotting, Roman rode through successive drifts that were knee-deep to the bay. When he came to a stormshrouded shack at the forks of the road he stopped long enough to learn that Lee had taken the south fork, and that she was about fifteen minutes ahead of him.

After that, riding southward, the wind was worse. Its shrill voice was like a sustained scream, and its pelting pressure caused the bay to veer to the left. The thought came to Roman that Lee's horse might drift off the road without her noticing it. There were no fences here; no landmarks visible in this sleazy twilight.

A tumbleweed, bouncing across the road like a huge rubber ball, spooked Roman's horse; when they passed a greasewood thicket the wind came through in a two-toned, reedy whistle. Some time after that Roman glimpsed a shack just west of the road, and was surprised that he had come this far. Elliott's place, he thought; but presently, as he knocked and the door opened, Roman understood that he had passed Elliott's house without seeing it. This man who scowled at him from the doorway was Joe Grimshaw.

"Did you see a buggy go by?" Roman asked.

Grimshaw nodded.

"How long ago?"

"None of your damned business," Grimshaw snapped and slammed the door.

"To hell with you!" Roman shouted. But he felt better, knowing Lee had got this far.

She was still on the road.

The next drift seemed longer and deeper than any he had encountered. He observed wheel marks at the north end of it, and presently glimpsed a trampled place where the horse had bogged down before going on.

The bay lunged through deep sand for what seemed half a mile before the drift leveled off. Roman searched for wheel marks, and found none; he rode back across the drift, scanning wind-rippled sand. There were no tracks except the bay's, and those were filling fast.

Worried now, Roman gave his horse a brief rest while he considered the next move.

Lee had started on through this drift, but seemingly hadn't reached the south end of it. Had she been forced to turn back and passed him, unseen, in the billowing dust? Or had her horse angled off to the east of the road?

Roman decided to circle eastward. If he was to find Lee Farnum it would have to be soon. He was rimming the north edge of the drift when a bullet went past his cheek, that metallic *whang* of sound instantly followed by a gun blast somewhere behind him.

Glancing back, Roman glimpsed an obscure shape in the tawny haze; he thought: Grimshaw! and spurred the bay into a lunging run.

TWO MORE bullets slashed close to Roman as he roweled his horse in zigzag flight. In the next instant, as a buggy loomed ahead of him, Roman jerked the bay into a sharp right turn. He was remotely aware of Lee Farnum's excited voice behind him; he heard the blast of Grimshaw's gun, and looking back, he saw that the settler had changed course with him.

There was another shot, the report muffled by the wind's howling, and some time after that, two more reports that were barely audible. Roman knew then that he was outrunning Grimshaw; he changed course again and looked back, seeing no sign of movement in the dust-clotted gloom. But that, he realized, didn't mean much; Grimshaw might be within fifty feet of him.

Roman gave his panting horse a breather. He peered into the swirling haze, his muscles cocked with expectancy. That first bullet hadn't missed him by much. Grimshaw was out for revenge. No doubt about it. The big Kansan must be loco.

Squinting into the wind, Roman observed movement off to the left. He tightened his reins, ready to wheel the bay around, then relaxed as a tumbleweed went bouncing past. He waited out another five minutes of patient watchfulness, not sure whether Grimshaw was ahead of him now, or behind him. The buggy, Roman calculated, was about due north of him and not more than a mile away. He wondered if it was stuck in a drift, and hoped it was; otherwise Lee might wander farther from the road and be harder to find.

Roman cursed the dust that irritated his eyes and nostrils. He uncorked the canteen, took a drink, and used a wet finger to wash out his eyes. This, he reflected, was what happened when a woman tried to do a man's work. Why couldn't women be satisfied to act like women? You wouldn't catch Slim Lacey sashaying around in a sandstorm.

Remembering his reaction the day of Lee Farnum's arrival in Deseronto, Roman thought morosely: I was right and should've stuck to it. This damned desert was no place for a lady doctor.

But presently, riding northward and seeing no sign of Grimshaw, Roman's mood changed. Lee shouldn't be blamed for going to a patient in a sandstorm; even though it was a hazardous, foolhardly thing, she deserved some credit for attempting it.

He set a northward course by keeping his left cheek to the wind. When he had covered about a mile, it occurred to Roman that the wind might have changed direction enough to throw him off. It was almost dark now and he thought: I won't see the rig until I'm on top of it.

Convinced that he had come far enough, Roman turned eastward, intending to circle; he had ridden a dozen paces when the remote sound of gunfire came to him—three shots in succession. Pulling up and canting his head, Roman listened. For a long moment there was only the monotonous rushing of the wind; then it came again: three spaced reports.

"A signal," he muttered.

It occurred to Roman that Lee Farnum might have a revolver; that she might be firing to attract aid. Curious and suspicious, Roman turned the bay westward. Presently the triple reports came again, louder now, and to the right. Roman took out his pocket knife. If this was Grimshaw there might be a chance to use it in close quarters.

ROMAN glimpsed the buggy's vague shape when he was within ten feet of it. In the same moment Mohee Jim loomed up beside it and called, "Light down, and rest your pants."

"What you doing here?" Roman demanded.

"Well, I took out after you, and ran into Joe Grimshaw," Brimberry explained. "He throwed a shot at me, and I throwed one back at him." Mohee Jim chuckled, adding, "Mine winged him."

"Where is he?" Roman asked, dismounting.

Mohee Jim gestured toward the buggy. "Having his arm fixed by the lady doctor."

"How'd you find her?" Roman demanded.

"Grimshaw seen the buggy while he was

chasing you," Mohee Jim said. "He was scairt loony, thinking he was going to bleed to death. Couldn't get here fast enough."

"So the lady doctor gets found by three men," Roman mused, leading his horse up to the buggy.

Lee Farnum asked urgently, "Are you all right, Ben?"

Roman nodded, and had his look at Grimshaw. The settler's face was tight with pain; he grunted as Lee tied a bandage around his right arm above the elbow. "You sure the bone ain't broke?" he asked in a whining voice.

Lee shook her head, and now, as Grimshaw got out of the buggy, Roman said, "Maybe I'll break it, Grimshaw. Maybe I'll break every damned bone in your body."

The settler shrank back against the buggy, holding up his left palm in a defensive gesture. "I wasn't trying to hit you," he insisted.

"Like hell you weren't!" Roman scoffed.

Grimshaw shook his head. "Just tried to scare you, is all. On account of that beatin' you gave me. Honest, Roman, that's all I was doing."

Watching this from the buggy, Lee Farnum saw a rage-prodded savagery alter Ben Roman's face. He said rankly, "You stinking liar!" and hit Grimshaw in the face.

The big Kansan yelped and went to his knees. "I ain't lyin'!" he whimpered. "Honest I ain't!"

Roman turned to Mohee Jim who was holding two horses. He said, "Get him out of here before I stomp him to death."

Afterward, driving the rig toward the road while Mohee Jim led the bay gelding, Roman asked, "Did you know you were lost, Lee?"

She nodded and gripped his arm tighter. "I was terribly frightened, Ben. So frightened I prayed."

"For a compass?" Roman inquired.

Lee shook her head. She tipped her face against his shoulder and said, "For you to come and find me."

Roman got an arm around her. It was full dark now and he couldn't see her face, but he knew she was smiling. "Reward?" he asked, and was hugely pleased at the eager response of her lips.

She wasn't thinking about a hospital now.

IT WAS still storming when Ben Roman returned from Lateral Seventeen at noon of the second day. George Frayne reported that the railroad telegraph wires were down, and four freight trains had been marooned just east of Deseronto by drifting sand.

"The crews walked back and are eating at Slim Lacey's restaurant," he said. "She's doing a big business."

Soon after that a wild-eyed young settler came in, asking for Doctor Farnum. "My wife was having bad labor pains when I left," Lloyd Tattum announced. "Her time has come, and this is her first baby."

"Doctor Farnum is at the Van Horn's," Roman said.

"Way out there? Then I'll have to ask Doc Shumway."

"He's at Karen Borgstrom's. Her boy is sick."

Tattum stared at him with wide, startled eyes. "What'll I do?" he asked, his voice high-pitched with alarm.

"Is your place nearer to Borgstrom's than Van Horn's?"

Tattum nodded. He stood as if dazed beyond the power of speech or movement.

"Then why don't you go get Doc Shumway?" Roman suggested.

"You reckon he'd leave his case, my wife being the lady doctor's patient?"

Roman nodded. "Tell Doc I sent you. Tell him I said it would be a favor to me."

"Much obliged," Tattum said and hurried out.

The sandstorm continued for another day and another night, and then ceased abruptly. After four days of howling wind, the calm seemed odd and the dustless clarity of this fifth morning revealed a string of box cars stretching eastward far as the eye could see. It was noon before the trains began moving, and after sundown when the last caboose rumbled past the S.P. depot.

Ben Roman had finished supper and was having his third cup of coffee at Slim's counter when Lee Farnum came into the restaurant. "So the wanderer returns," he greeted her. "How's the Van Horn boy?"

"Out of danger, I think," Lee said. "But he had a bad time."

She took the stool beside Roman; she smiled at Slim and asked, "What's good for supper?"

"All I have left is beef stew," Slim said. "The railroaders ate up everything else."

"Then beef stew it is," Lee said. Turning to Roman she ceased smiling. A weariness showed in her face as she said, "I stopped by the Tattum place and found day-old twins."

"Twins!" Roman echoed. "Young Tattum must be mighty proud of himself."

"He said you suggested he get Doctor Shumway. Is that so, Ben?"

Roman nodded. Strongly aware of her calculating appraisal, he said, "Didn't like the idea of you busting out into that storm again."

She eyed him intently, her face grave. "Was that the only reason?"

"Well, not exactly."

"Then what was it?"

Roman shrugged. Resenting her inquisitiveness he asked gruffly, "What difference does it make?"

"I want to know, Ben."

Roman took out his Durham sack and gave his attention to shaping a cigarette.

"Was it because you believed it would make Doctor Shumway feel good, thinking he was needed?" she asked.

Roman nodded. Bracing himself for an argument, he said, "That's it exactly," and was astonished at the swift change in her face.

She had appeared angry, or on the verge of anger. Now she smiled and said, "I'm glad you did it."

As Slim brought her supper, Lee added, "But if it had been to keep me out of the storm I would've resigned."

Roman laughed at her. "I can see you resigning," he scoffed.

"I mean it, Ben. I insist on working the job as a doctor, not as a woman."

PRESENTLY she said, "I stopped by at the Borgstrom place, too."

"How's the boy?"

"Still quite sick. But Doctor Shumway will save him." She smiled, adding, "The boy probably doesn't know it, but he's going to have a step-father."

Roman said thoughtfully, "Karen Borgstrom may be able to keep Doc sober, but she'll never turn him into a farmer."

"That shouldn't be necessary, Ben. I told Doctor Shumway there were more patients than one practitioner could take care of."

"So?"

"I said I was going to request that you put him on the payroll."

Roman peered at her. "You mean two doctors?"

Lee nodded. "It's ridiculous for so large a project to have only one doctor." Turning to Slim, she asked, "Don't you agree?"

Slim thought about it for a moment, regarding her with a grave intentness.

Watching these two young women face each other across the counter, Roman observed how unlike they were. It was more than the difference between blonde and brunette, or between a restaurant keeper and a lady doctor. It went deeper than that; an inherent, basic difference that influenced their thinking.

"Running the new hospital will probably take up most of your time," Slim said finally.

"But that has nothing to do with it," Lee insisted. "This is a growing community of far-spaced homes. Just because people got along with one doctor is no reason why they should always have to do it." She made an impatient gesture with her hands. "With Shumway taking over most of the practice out there I could handle the hospital cases and be available when needed at the construction camp."

Roman winked at Slim. "She missed her calling. Should've been a lawyer."

"But don't you see how much better that would be?"

Roman nodded. He said with exaggerated reluctance, "You win, if I can put it over with the Los Angeles office."

Then Mohee Jim Brimberry opened the screen door and called, "You're wanted at the hotel, Miss Farnum. A man with a busted head."

Roman went to the doorway with her; he asked, "What happened, Mohee?"

"Tony Caruso brought him in. Tony says there was a free-for-all fight and this jigger got hit over the head with a bottle. Damned near scalped him."

Afterward, while Lee Farnum took care of the injured man, Caruso told Roman about the fight. "It's that new saloon Gallatin opened up. The men drink for four days and do no work."

"So that's it," Roman muttered, remembering that Gallatin had been in town the past few days, he asked, "Who's running the saloon?"

"Black Mike Moynihan. He quit his job and went into partnership with Gallatin."

"The big Irish dunce!" Roman exclaimed. "Why wasn't I told about this before?"

"The storm," Caruso explained. "Mister Mac Ivor said you should be told. But there was too much storm."

Mohee Jim followed Roman down the dark street. He asked, "What you got in mind, Ben?"

"I'm going to close that damned saloon."

BLACK MIKE MOYNIHAN was a trifle drunk and happy as a man could be. For the first time in his life he stood on the money side of a bar. Fifty cents of every dollar that crossed the crude counter was his; in five days as a saloonkeeper he had made more than a gang foreman got for a month of hard work.

Dispensing drinks with a fine flourish, Moynihan beamed at his boozy customers. "'Twas a grand and glorious day for us all when Lew Gallatin opened this saloon," he told them. "What good is it to work if a man can't belly up to a bar of an evenin'?"

Moynihan was polishing a glass when Ben Roman and Mohee Jim entered the tent. "Come have a drink on the house," Black Mike invited graciously, and as they came up to the bar, he asked, "What'll you have, gents? Bourbon or rye?"

"Neither," Roman said. "We're closing this place."

"Closing it?" Moynihan asked, his smile fading. "You mean a twelve o'clock curfew?"

Roman shook his head. "I mean you're going out of the saloon business, Mike."

Moynihan peered at him in bug-eyed wonderment. "You must be funnin' me," he said.

"I'll not have a saloon in this camp," Roman announced. Watching Moynihan's expression change from disbelief to anger, he said, "Lew Gallatin jobbed you, Mike. He knew there'd be trouble, and he wanted you to take it."

"Trouble me eye!" Moynihan scoffed, and glanced at the men who lined his bar. "These boys want a place to take a sociable nip of an evening. Where's the trouble in that?"

One of the customers shouted, "You're right, Moynihan. Absolutely right!"

And another suggested. "Don't let him hooraw you, Mike."

"You hear?" Moynihan asked jubilantly. "You'll not close this place, Ben Roman. 'Tis a business establishment that doesn't concern you at all."

Roman turned to Brimberry, said, "Go get a can of kerosene."

As Mohee Jim went out, Moynihan came from behind the plank counter. "I'll take no more lip from you," he warned. "Get out, or I'll throw ye out."

Roman shouldered a drunk aside, making room for himself with his back to the bar. He said quietly, "No need to have trouble, Mike. You can go on the job as foreman tomorrow morning."

"Ah, I can, can I?" Moynihan cried, his voice shrill with outrage. "Me, that's become the proprietor of a fine saloon!"

He came up in front of Roman and shook a huge fist at him and said again, "Get out!"

Roman was strongly aware of attentive faces forming a closeranked ring behind Moynihan—eager, expectant faces. This smokefouled tent had been noisy with talk

and laughter a few moments ago; now a strict silence prevailed. Roman recalled the fight on the train and wondered if he could whip this big Irishman again, and had his doubts. He thought: I'll have to hit him first—and hard.

"Are you deaf?" Moynihan demanded. "I said get out!"

Roman glanced toward the doorway; Mohee Jim might not show for another five or ten minutes, which was longer than this rage-prodded Irishman would wait. So thinking, Roman peered past Moynihan and called, "Douse the canvas with kerosene!"

AS MOYNIHAN turned to look, Roman hit him on the jaw with a sledging right that jarred the big Irishman into a tilted, dancelike shuffle; he rocked Moynihan with successive lefts and rights to the face and stepped back as Mike took a wild swing at him. The margin of that miss told Roman those first blows had befuddled Black Mike. Roman blocked a two-fisted attack with his guarding arms, and slugged Moynihan in the belly.

Black Mike squawled a curse. He backed off and wiped his bleeding nose on an upbunched shoulder. "I'll smash you to smithereens!" he shouted, and lunged at Roman again.

The lust for battle was a bright shining in Moynihan's eyes; but there was an odd deliberateness in the way he handled his fists. It was as if he took time to think between each swing. Roman evaded his clumsy charge by weaving aside; Moynihan endeavored to check but his fist smashed against the plank bar.

Black Mike yelped and wheeled around, looking for Roman. He sucked his bruised knuckles and demanded pantingly, "Why don't you stand and fight?"

Roman waited, wanting to end this with one well-placed blow. He wasn't aware of Angus Mac Ivor's presence in the crowd until Angu urged, "Finish him off, Ben."

Some friend of Moynihan's snarled, "You keep out of it!"

And now, as Black Mike charged again, Roman heard men scuffling behind him. He dodged away from Moynihan's clubbing fists, pivoted in a complete circle and clouted Moynihan in the face. Roman understood there was another fight going on; hearing the impact of fists against flesh, he thought, Angus is in it, and was amused by that realization.

Roman targeted Moynihan's scowling face with a lancing right, and took a punch in the chest that knocked him back. He swung at Moynihan's jaw, missed, and was jolted off balance by a man behind him. Crouching as he dodged, Roman heard Moynihan and another man collide, and was grabbed around the neck by a burly laborer who cried, "Here he is, Mike!"

Roman drove a knee into this man's groin; he rammed his way toward Mac Ivor and now heard Brimberry call, "Ben—where you at?"

"Shoot out the light!" Roman shouted.

Moynihan came at him, bellowed, "Stand you devil—stand and fight!"

Roman ripped free of the hands that grasped him from behind; he dodged a flung bottle and was slugging it out with Moynihan when Brimberry's gun exploded. There was a crash of cascading glass as the lamplight faded, and now Moynihan howled, "Somebody go get a lantern!"

THE DARK TENT was alive with sound and movement; with raw-voiced cursing and grunting and the thud of fists. Roman grinned. Moynihan's customers were now battling one another; he fought his way toward the entrance and wondered how Angus had fared. A fist smashed against his ribs; he struck out wildly and collided with a pair of panting men locked in fierce wrestling. He heard them go down, one man loosing an agonized grunt.

Aware of fresh air cutting through the stench of spilled kerosene and sweat and whisky-tainted breath, Roman understood that he was near the doorway. A man bumped into him, demanded, "Who are you?" and struck without waiting for an answer. Roman crouched, taking the blow across a shoulder; butting this man aside, he heard Mohee Jim call.

Roman turned to the left and glimpsed two vague shapes against the doorway's lesser darkness. He asked, "Is Angus with you, Mohee?"

"In person," Mac Ivor muttered. "Are those fools going to fight all night?"

Roman asked, "You got some kerosene, Mohee?"

"Better'n three gallons. Where you want it used?"

"On the bar," Roman said. "Go around back and cut a hole in the canvas. Douse the bar and light it, then douse the back wall too."

As Brimberry disappeared into the darkness, Roman said amusedly, "That should end the free-for-all, Angus."

It did.

As the kerosene-drenched bar burst into flame a man yelled, "Fire!" Then the rear wall of the tent blazed up and terrified men stampeded toward the doorway. . . .

Roman, Mac Ivor and Brimberry were having coffee in the cookshack when Black Mike Moynihan came in. The faces of Roman and Mac Ivor bore marks of battle, but those bruises were superficial compared to the damage that had been done to Black Mike's bloodcrusted countenance. One eye was swollen completely shut, strips of hide had been peeled from both cheeks, and blood dribbled from the corners of his mashed lips.

Peering at the cook with his good eye, Moynihan said sourly, "I want a bucket of hot water and some salt."

Then he looked at Roman and asked, "Do I run a gang on this stinking outfit, or don't I?"

"Sure," Roman said and grinned at him. "Come have yourself a cup of coffee, Mike."

DIVERSION from the new cut sent water into the laterals the first week of September; it brought hope to settlers whose fields had escaped the flood, and Frank Monroe heralded the event with a front-page story headlined: Hazelhurst Plan Saves Crops!

Ben Roman spent most of his time at the construction camp. During a brief stay in town he sent off a letter to Phil Judson asking what progress he was making with Epes Randolph, and received a one-line note in reply: *Nothing definite yet.*

Discussing this with Mac Ivor, Roman complained, "What are they waiting for, Angus—next year's flood season?"

"Southern Pacific will never put money into this rag-tag concern," Mac Ivor predicted dourly. "They've got better sense."

Later in the month Doc Shumway and Karen Borgstrom were married by a circuit-riding minister. Settlers from the far-off flats came to town for the wedding; they put on a shivaree at the Empire Hotel where Doc and Karen spent their wedding night.

The following week Lee Farnum opened her new hospital. Oscar Hoffman, speaker for the occasion, announced that the Citizens' Committee would share the cost of maintaining it, dollar for dollar, with Imperial. Hoffman spoke eloquently of Deseronto's civic pride, and requested three cheers "for our lovely lady doctor."

Lee Farnum was radiant, as Roman had known she would be. Revealing more emotion than he had ever observed in her, she was like a bride at a wedding.

Slim Lacey noticed this, too, for she said to Roman, "I've never seen her so happy, nor so beautiful."

"That's what being in love does to a woman," he said.

Slim met his gaze directly; she asked, "Is that it, Ben?"

Roman nodded, and now, as they joined the crowd going to see the ward, he explained, "She's in love with this warehouse that's turned into a hospital."

October was a good month in the valley. As daytime heat diminished and nights turned cool, men sniffed the smoky pungence of autumn air; they scooped up dirt and let it trickle through their callused fingers. "Such good soil," they said, and their wives remarked about Thanksgiving being near at hand.

When Roman received a report of heavy rains in the north he conferred with Mac Ivor, who said confidently, "There'll be no flood this late in the season."

But Roman was uneasy. The cut, now extending beyond both ends of the dynamite dam, was in its most vulnerable stage. Peering at the pile-supported barricade, he understood how inadequate it would be if the Red Bull went on a rampage.

Three days later Mohee Jim rode in with another weather report. The heavy rains had caused a rise in the Gunnison River.

"Too far off to affect us much down here," Mac Ivor said, and Roman wondered why that prediction sounded familiar to him.

Mohee Jim climbed into saddle; he said, "They're circulating petitions for Hazelhurst to take your place as general manager of this outfit."

"Who's circulating them?" Roman demanded.

"Well, Joe Grimshaw is taking one around to all the settlers, asking them to sign it. The other one is at Gallatin's bar." He chuckled, adding, "Lew sure looked surprised when I signed it."

"*You* signed it?"

Mohee Jim nodded. "And I'm hoping Hazelhurst takes your place."

"So that's it," Roman muttered. "Anything to get me into the Mogollons."

"Sure, Ben. It'd be the biggest favor they ever done you. Even with the weather cooling off, this ain't no fit place for fellows like us. It's getting too crowded—too much hustle and bustle. We need a country where there's room enough and time enough."

"But how about women?" Roman asked, very sober about this. "Where would I find another pair like Slim Lacey and the lady doctor?"

Brimberry spat disgustedly. "You keep fussin' around them and you'll end up married," he warned.

"To both of them?"

"Why, no, you idjit. Ain't being hitched to one female bad enough?"

Roman shrugged. "Suppose it depends on the female," he suggested.

"Now that's a fool notion," Brimberry muttered and rode off in his slumped loose-jointed fashion.

BRIMBERRY returned that evening with a report which told of continuing rains that extended from the upper basin as far south as Arizona and eastward into New Mexico. Roman handed the report to Mac Ivor. "The whole watershed," he muttered. "I think we're in for trouble, Angus."

"I can't believe it," Mac Ivor protested, obstinate as always when his scientific deductions were involved. "There hasn't been high water this late in the past twenty-seven years."

But after supper, as Brimberry made ready to leave, Roman said, "You keep in close touch with the telegraph operator, Mohee. If there's mention of a rise in the Bill Williams or the Gila you come running."

Brimberry didn't return that night or the next morning. At noon Roman saddled his bay gelding; he said to Mac Ivor, "There's probably nothing wrong, but I want to be close to the telegraph office, just in case."

When he got to town Roman learned there was a break in the telegraph line west of Yuma. "Freight train jumped the tracks and knocked down a half mile of poles," the operator told him. "May be evening before they get a line set up. . . ."

Lee Farnum was eating supper at Slim's counter when Roman came into the restaurant; she said reassuringly, "Those petitions won't amount to much, Ben. I've talked to a lot of people, and most of them aren't signing."

"Let them sign and be damned to them," Roman muttered. "It's no fit job for a man anyway."

Lee smiled at him. "It will be, when you conquer the river. You'll like the job then."

Roman shook his head. "The day we lick the Red Bull I'll put a sign on the door: Been here, but gone."

"Gone where?" Lee asked.

"On a wild-horse roundup," Slim said soberly.

Clark Hazelhurst hurried in from the street, his face flushed and his voice high with excitement as he announced, "South-

ern Pacific has come in with us! They're going to build a concrete gate at Pilot Knob!"

Roman peered at him, and Lee Farnum demanded, "How do you know?"

"Phil Judson just arrived on the eastbound train. He says S.P. has put two hundred thousand dollars into the company."

"Why, that's wonderful!" Lee exclaimed. She grasped Roman's arm and shook him and demanded, "Don't you understand, Ben? The thing you said would lick the river has happened!"

Roman asked, "Where's Judson now?"

"At the saloon, waiting to buy you a drink."

As if thinking aloud, Roman mused, "Too bad John isn't here," and was walking toward the doorway when Frank Monroe bustled in.

"I've just talked to Judson," Monroe said, seeming dazed by what he'd heard. "Judson says you're the one who put it over. He says you talked him into applying the pressure on Epes Randolph. Is that right?"

Roman chuckled. "Goes against the grain, doesn't it?" he said derisively. Then, expanding his chest and giving Monroe an exaggerated, up-chinned appraisal, he announced, "Look me over, Frank. I'm the big mogul—the one you said wasn't fit to be general manager."

Whereupon he strutted out of the restaurant, allowing the screen door to slam behind him.

IT WAS a big night for Deseronto. Men who had become conditioned to bad news converged on Gallatin's saloon with joyful eagerness. "The long wait is over!" they told each other. "We've won out at last!"

It was a big night for Ben Roman, too. Standing at the bar with Phil Judson, he was besieged by well-wishers wanting to shake his hand. Men who'd scarcely bothered to speak in the past now slapped him on the back and demanded the privilege of buying him drinks. There were two exceptions: Lew Gallatin, kept busy by the influx of customers, paid Roman no compliments; and Clark Hazelhurst remained sullenly aloof at one end of the bar.

Roman plied Phil Judson with questions. "Are you sure it's all settled, Phil—that there'll be no backing out?"

"I'm positive," Judson assured him. "I've just come from San Francisco, where Epes is winding up the operating details with the Harrimans. You're to remain in charge until we lay track right up to the intake."

Accompanying Judson to the depot, Roman asked, "How soon will you start work on the spur track, Phil?"

"Within the week. Jack Carrillo will be construction boss." Judson climbed up to a vestibule as the train began moving; he called back, "See you at Pilot Knob, Ben."

"Bueno!" Roman shouted. He was passing the depot when the telegraph operator called from the baywindow: "They've repaired the line east. I'll have some delayed weather reports after a while. Where do you want 'em delivered?"

Roman thought for a moment. If he went back to the saloon he'd end up drunk. He wasn't exactly sober as it was. "I'll be at Slim Lacey's restaurant," he said, and wondered if Frank Monroe was still there.

Roman smiled, thinking of the big-mogul act he had put on for Monroe, and the gawk-eyed way Frank had looked at him.

He was into the alley and approaching Erickson's blacksmith shop when a shadowy shape loomed out of the darkness beside him. Roman dodged as a fist grazed his chin; he swung and heard this man grunt. Then someone jumped him from behind, grasping his arms and hanging on while the first man hit him in the face.

Roman lunged sideways, dragging the man behind him; he collided with a board fence and went to his knees. Boot-churned dust got into his nostrils; the taste of blood was on his lips. He tried to get up, but a fist smashed against his jaw and he fell back on the man who held his arms.

Groggy now, Roman was aware of whisky smell and a bottle being forced between his lips. He swallowed until he

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gagged; he struggled to get up and was slugged again. Whisky choked him. He tried to pull away from the bottle, but it kept pouring the gagging whisky into his mouth.

Afterward Roman understood that he was being carried. But it didn't seem important.

FRANK MONROE sat at his desk composing a front-page story for what was to be the *Clarion's* first "extra" edition.

It was almost ten o'clock now, and hot and sultry; but men still tromped the plank walks and trade was brisk at Gallatin's saloon.

The story should have been an easy one to write; a joyous task to accomplish. But Monroe's face, half masked by a green eyeshade, revealed the gravity of his thinking.

"The big mogul," Monroe muttered, recalling Roman's brash acceptance of the role.

Clark Hazelhurst looked in the doorway and asked him, "Getting out a special edition?"

Monroe nodded. He took off the eyeshade and wiped his perspiring face and said, "It's an important story, Clark. A slice of history in the making." Then he asked, "How's Roman taking his success?"

"Just as you'd expect. He was swilling bourbon at Gallatin's bar the last I saw of him. He should be pretty well soused by now."

Monroe sighed. He glanced at the penciled lines on the sheet of paper before him and said, "Seems odd for me to be writing him up as a hero. But I've got no choice, Clark. No matter what my personal opinion of him is, Ben Roman has now accomplished the one thing that will save Imperial Valley."

"If Judson was telling the truth."

"But what reason would he have for lying about it?"

Hazelhurst shrugged. "None that I can think of," he admitted and went on along the street.

Some time after that Slim Lacey came into the office and asked, "Do you know where Ben is?"

"At the saloon, I suppose. Why?"

"The S.P. operator brought some delayed weather reports to the restaurant. He said Ben told him to bring them there. That was an hour ago, and Ben hasn't showed up."

Monroe said, "He's probably too drunk to read a weather report. The big mogul is celebrating."

"But these reports are important, Frank. They tell about high water."

Monroe got up at once; he said, "I'll go fetch him," and hurried across Main Street toward the tent saloon.

Slim followed him to a point across from the saloon. She visualized how it would be over there, with Ben basking in a whisky glow of praise from the crowd. Ben had never been one to brag or act important, but he was in a bragging mood tonight for sure.

When Monroe came out of the tent alone, she called, "Here, Frank."

He came over and said, "Ben isn't in there. Gallatin says he got awful drunk before he left. Lying-down drunk, Lew called it."

"Perhaps he went home," Slim suggested.

"I'll go look," Monroe said and hurried off.

Walking slowly toward her restaurant, Slim thought of another place Ben might be: on the hotel veranda with Lee Farnum. She peered over there, observed a couple sitting in the shadows beyond the lamplit doorway and thought angrily, so that's where he is!

BUT A MOMENT later, as she came to the veranda railing, Slim saw that the man with Lee Farnum was Clark Hazelhurst. Embarrassed now, she said, "I thought you were Ben."

"An insult," Hazelhurst chided. Then he asked teasingly, "Is Ben late for a date?"

[*Turn page*]

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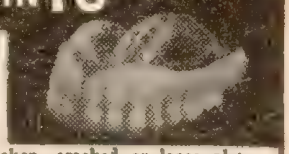

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"No, but I wanted to tell him something. He intended to be at the restaurant an hour ago."

"This is a big night for Ben," Lee Farnum said, smiling. "We must be tolerant with him at a time like this."

Slim disliked the patronizing tone of her voice; when Lee asked, "Don't you agree?" Slim merely shrugged, and watched Frank Monroe come along the sidewalk.

"He's not in his room," Frank announced.

"Why are you looking for him?" Hazelhurst asked.

"Because Slim has some delayed weather reports that Roman should see."

Hazelhurst came off the veranda at once. "Did they say anything about high water?" he demanded.

Slim nodded. "Several rivers at flood stage."

"My God!" Hazelhurst exclaimed. "Where are the reports?"

"At the restaurant. On the counter."

Hazelhurst started across the street at a run, then stopped and called back, "Frank, go tell Brimberry to saddle a horse for me!"

"He went to Pilot Knob with a supply wagon this afternoon," Slim said, and as Monroe stood there not knowing what to do, she suggested urgently, "We should be looking for Ben."

"Where?" Monroe asked. "Where would we look for him?"

"Perhaps he went on the train with Judson." Lee Farnum offered.

Slim shook his head.

"Ben talked to the telegraph operator after the train left."

Hazelhurst came across the street, visibly excited. "The cut must be closed at once," he announced. "I'm taking charge at Pilot Knob and I shall expect you three people to testify that it was necessary—to corroborate the fact that Ben Roman was lying drunk when the whole valley was threatened by a disastrous flood."

"But Ben must be somewhere nearby," Slim protested.

Hazelhurst gave her a derisive smile; he

asked, "What good is a drunken man at a time like this?"

"I'll back you up," Morgan said soberly. "We're lucky that you're available to take charge."

"Good," Hazelhurst said and there was a jubilant smile on his face as he hurried toward the stable with Monroe.

When Slim started back along the street, Lee asked, "Where are you going?"

"To look for Ben," Slim said and turned away.

She crossed the vacant lot that ran along one side of the tent saloon and turned into an alley behind it. She passed French Nellie's place, the drawn blinds giving scarcely any illumination, and peered into the clotted shadows behind the saloon. Stacked whisky kegs gave off a sour, acrid odor here, and a man in the saloon shouted: "Hurrah for Imperial Valley, by hell!"

AN EASTBOUND freight whistled far out on the flats, and as Slim circled around to Main Street she heard the staccato beat of a hard-running horse.

That would be Clark Hazelhurst, going to Pilot Knob.

All the way back to the restaurant, Slim peered into dark places, thinking that Ben might be lying drunk somewhere along the street. Coming to a vacant lot, she crossed it twice before finally giving up and going to the restaurant.

Where, she wondered impatiently, could he be? Why hadn't anyone seen him since he left the saloon?

She was behind the counter, pouring herself a cup of coffee, when Frank Monroe came in.

"Well," he said, "I've found out where Ben is."

Slim waited for him to say the rest of it; when he didn't she asked, "Where is he?"

"At French Nellie's."

Slim peered at him in disbelief. She said, "No!" and absently placed the coffee in

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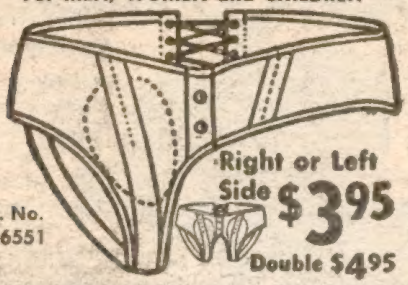

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front of Monroe. "He wouldn't go there, Frank. Drunk or sober."

"But he did," Monroe insisted. "I stopped by at the saloon again. Galatin says Roman is on a bed in French Nellie's place, dead drunk." As if abruptly remembering something humorous, he laughed. "And I was writing Roman up as a hero—as the great White Knight of Imperial Valley."

Slim said, "You've got to get him out of there."

"Me?"

Slim nodded.

"But why should I?"

"Because I'm asking you to, Frank."

Monroe looked at her in narrow-eyed silence for a moment. Then he said, "I've been a patient man, Slim. I've waited all this time, knowing that eventually you would see Ben Roman for what he is. If you can't see it now you never will."

Slim shrugged. She said dully, "He's what he is, Frank. Will you go get him, or must I?"

"He deserves no consideration," Monroe said wrathfully. "None at all."

But as Slim came from behind the counter and walked toward the doorway, he said, "All right. I'll go get him."

There was utter resignation in his voice, and in the way he moved. All the anger faded; his brown eyes held the hurt, baffled expression of a man discarding a long-cherished dream. At this moment he looked old and empty and forlorn. Slim felt sorry for him. She patted his shoulder and said, "Maybe it's different than you think, Frank."

"You mean, about us?"

Slim nodded, and when his arms came around her hesitantly she gave him his kiss willingly, wishfully. He offered no protest when she drew back; his need for her was a bright shining in his eyes, but his voice was gentle as he said, "Then I'll wait some more."

(To be continued in the next issue)

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Inside back cover

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Back cover